Withhold

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Withhold

by PAW_07

Summary

What if Jim used his second chance a little more sensibly? What if he knew better than to leave everything to chance? So, he promised himself to intervene only once. Only one time, because now he doesn't have any armor or a big sword to back him up. He only has his memories … and he will not give them to just anyone.

Also, this story has a Tvtropes page! TvTropes

Unbecoming

Chapter Notes

YokaiLuna made the wonderful fanart: Tumblr

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...

I recall sad summers and sad springs,

Rain dripping down and clearing everything.

All traces are lost to the water's cool caress,

Perhaps these clean waters are for the best.

Still, my failures are my own.

So here I stand. I will withhold,

In this brook, just like a stone.

…

Jim woke with a start and immediately, as odd as it sounds, his soul felt … *misplaced*. It was like a weight had been taken from it. *Stolen* from it. Some deep part of him immediately dubbed the missing weight as magic. And, for a moment, Jim almost felt compelled to bury his head back under his sheets and weep. And not just any weeping. No. No. Ugly weeping. Full on snot-avalanche down his face and puffy red eyes weeping, which would be accompanied with full on choking-sobbing that immediately made everyone within hearing distance uncomfortable.

But, somehow, he snapped out of it when he noticed … he wasn't in a cage.

Quickly, he sat up and exhaled like he was ridding himself of the air from that old life and that cage he had been placed in. Did he really … get to go back?

With a determined face, the teenager quickly grabbed his cell phone and looked at the date just to make sure this wasn't all a dream or a cruel joke from Unkar the Unfortunate. His phone revealed all. It was *that* day again when this all began and he had found the amulet.

For a moment, he sat there dumbfounded. He wasn't the Trollhunter. He wasn't in a cage. He hadn't screwed up and ruined everything. He hadn't released Gunmar. He hadn't fucked up!

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" hooted Jim as he fell back into his bed, elation pumping through his veins. Yet, as quickly as the feeling gripped him, it was gone.

But … his troll friends, what would they do without him? Who would bear the heavy burden of the title he rejected? Draal? Probably, but …

hadn't he said something about fate? That it wasn't his fate to be Trollhunter? Then, whose was it? Would it even be anyones? In fact, what if Bular claimed the amulent when he wasn't there to take it? What if he crushed it? What if he took it immediately to Killahead bridge? What if Jim had caused the same fate to happen again, but Gunmar was only released sooner with his entire army?

Rising to his feet, Jim wondered if he could pick the amulet up in his backpack without touching it or if he could secretly watch it until a rightful hand could pick it up. Or, better yet, what if the previous Trollhunter didn't lose it at all? Yeah! Maybe Draal could have a little more time with his father. Maybe the *right troll* hadn't meant to lose it at all? Perhaps, Jim's fate wasn't meant to be the new Trollhunter, but to know the future so he could save the current Trollhunter: Kanjigar the Courageous!

Looking at the clock and seeing how early it was, the teenager wondered if there was still time.

Nodding with his decision, the youth threw on a pair of pants and a hoodie to hide his scraggly appearance. Jim was already halfway out the front door when he stalled and looked back. Kanjigar died in the sunlight, right?

Groaning, wondering what he was going to do, the teenager quickly spotted the thick quilt his grandma made hanging on the back of the couch.

"Forgive me, grandma," muttered Jim to himself as he grabbed the heavy quilt, stalling once more in thought. He needed a weapon or at least a distraction as well. His skills were best with a kitchen knife and a frying pan, but he felt those two items lacked in subtlety. Not that that stopped him from stuffing a frying pan and butcher knife into his backpack. With that, the teenager tripped out the front door, poorly equipped but ready for this.

Personally, part of Jim was starting to wonder if Kanjigar really was the right troll for the job, but then again it wasn't like he could do nothing. If being around magic had taught Jim anything, it was that magic could be vindictive if left to loiter. He wasn't going to completely leave everything to chance with Kanjigar. He would take the lesson Unkar had offered him and make the world a little better without completely interfering.

Kanjigar could deal with this. He just needed a little help this one time

… and maybe a little forewarning about a few things to come.

His mind scrambling together a plan, Jim was already half way to the canal. He had never pedaled so fast in his entire life and yet, the fog lifting, he was relieved to see the lack of stones in the canal's bed. He still had time, especially if that was the sounds of a fight he was hearing.

Really, how did no one know of the troll world with how much noise they made? Then again, humans liked to be in their own little world. He was no different in that aspect as painful as it was to admit.

Jumping off his bike, Jim got onto his belly and peaked into the spillway. There, among the bridge's support beams, was a battle. Part of him wanted to rush into the skirmish himself and get into the thick of things, but the lack of armor quickly reminded him of his place. In fact, he actually felt naked without it.

Shaking off the feeling of loss, Jim tried to mind the fight. Bular was starting to get the upper hand and even from here Jim could see Kanjigar's armor flickering. He needed to intervene *now*. The best way to do that would be to distract Bular.

Reaching into his bag quickly, Jim pulled out a cutting knife and a skillet. Yeah, he should have thought his repertoire out a little more. Now, which one was more aerodynamic? The knife was the obvious answer, but it just didn't seem as effective as say a skillet to the face.

Shrugging, Jim slung his quilt over his shoulder and proceeded to slide down the canal's incline. Once he felt he was within throwing distance, he prayed he would get his cookware back mostly undented because it really was a shame to break up a set, and then he let it loose.

The resulting clang was impressive and the teenager was almost proud when Bular barked in surprise, grabbing for his face. Bullseye, right in the kisser it would seem. It was unlikely that Jim did any real damage, but maybe the distraction would give Kanjigar the opening he needed to win this fight.

Unfortunately, a surprise *pan to the face* seemed to have the opposite effect. Instead of attacking, a bewilder look took over Kanjigar's face as he turned to see where the projectile had come from. He then seemed to freeze up when he caught sight of Jim.

Oh, right … normal trolls hated being caught by humans.

Bular, regaining his composure from the surprise skillet experience, took this opportunity and suddenly slashed Kanjigar across his sword-bearing arm.

The current Trollhunter's scream echoed in the canal and then Kanjigar started to fall.

Immediately, Jim cursed himself, thinking he was going to see a collection of stone slam into the bottom of the waterway and scatter like so many marbles. Instead, even though one of his arms was now useless and dripping troll-blood, Kanjigar managed to grab onto a support beam and was now hanging there just by his fingers.

The Gumm Gumm immediately smiled down at Merlin's champion as if already claiming victory. Though he did take a moment to turn and glare at the human that had hit him in the face. Given the hood, he couldn't make out many features … but all humans looked the same anyway.

Chuckling, Bular leaned down over the hanging Trollhunter, his feet threatening to stomp Kanjigar's fingers. "Submit."

Jim, barely hearing what was going on, already knew what the current Trollhunter was going to say. He was so glad he brought his grandma's quilt.

"I will not submit."

"We shall see about that. You will submit one way or another," said Bular as he reached down to grab Kanjigar by a horn, likely to slam his head against the beam repeatedly until he was either compliant or an unconscious mass.

Kanjigar, ever defiant, merely replied, "I will never succumb … nor will the next Trollhunter."

Bular's eye went wide in realization … and then Kanigar let go.

Jim, muscles springing into action, was throwing the quilt over the falling troll just as he hit the cement with a dull thud. For a brief moment, Jim stood there over the quilt and the lump under it wondering how sun-stained the larger troll had gotten in the fall.

Bular, seeming to want to know the same answer as well, stilled with a hand still outstretched. Part of his mind hadn't even questioned why a human was here until he heard a slight moan from beneath the quilt

as Kanjigar shifted below the heavy fabric. So he was still alive … no thanks to the interloper.

The Gumm Gumm's infuriated glare immediately fell on the said interloper. Suprisingly, instead of taking a step back in dread, the human kept his footing and instead pulled his hood down further.

"Whelp! Why have you interfered?" suddenly growled Bular, interrupting the growing silence. "And why do you hide your face? Is it because I know you? Are you an *impure*?"

Beside himself, Jim almost snapped his head up in surprise. Bular … thought he was a Changeling? Well, he wasn't about to correct him. It was best to throw the hulking gargoyle off his scent after all. If that got Strickler slammed against a wall with allegations, more points for Team Good as far as he was concerned.

"Did you not hear me, whelp? You seem too fearless for a mere human. Remove that hooded covering immediately so I will know who I will be snacking on tonight," barked Bular, trying to take in every detail of the hooded being before him.

Beside himself, knowing he should keep his mouth shut but was just unable to, Jim shrugged, "Yeah, I'm going to have to pass on that dinner date. You are not my type."

The expression that overcame the dark troll was quite amusing, but Jim didn't dare take time to enjoy it. Kanjigar seemed to be gathering his wits now and was struggling to his feet. So, Jim quickly made sure the quilt was evenly dragging over the slowly standing troll to keep him from burning in the sun. He had better things to do than banter with Bular anyway, like getting an obviously disoriented Kanjigar away from the base of the bridge. He'd rather lead him to the entrance of Troll Market, but with Bular above them like a haggard crow, that was unlikely to happen.

Instead, he would just have to find a nice dark place for the current Trollhunter to wait out the day … and maybe force him to listen to what a human whelp had to say.

Turning his back to Bular, even as the grim troll roared at him from above, Jim carefully touched the quilt with a reassuring grip. He then leaned in, keeping his voice low and calm despite how his heart was hammering in his chest. He wasn't going to mess up this chance. He *wouldn't*.

“Come with me, Kanjigar the Courageous,” whispered Jim as he leaned down towards the quilt, trying to keep his voice even. Though, he honestly didn’t know if the troll would be able to hear him with Bular’s growls or for that matter walk upright. The quilt was big, but not that big. “But, maybe stay hunched over, big guy. If, you know, you like your toes.”

Kanjigar seemed to cringe at the warning before he crouched back down. He probably was injured, but at least he seemed able-minded enough to listen. Then, not waiting for a reply, Jim put a hand on what he presumed was the back of the Trollhunter’s arm and pushed forward slightly. The troll beneath the sheet groaned and stumbled slightly, seeming to fall to one knee.

Yeah, Kanjigar was definitely injured. He needed to get him out of the sun immediately. So, pressing as much authority as he could muster into his voice, Jim added, “Rise, Kanjigar the Courageous. If you do not rise, Bular will kill you.”

Panting, obviously in pain and probably sun-stained in some way, the troll struggled to his feet again.

“Follow me to the shadows,” said Jim with a touch of relief in his voice as he pushed against the troll’s arm again.

It was slow going, Bular barking threats in the background, but Kanjigar finally seemed able to keep a steady pace. He was even getting up the incline with little effort when Bular called out again.

“Who are you interfere, whelp?! Why help the Trollhunter? Show me your face so that I may bring you a slow end!” demanded the Gumm Gumm, his voice enraged yet supringly even.

Kanjigar, as if remembering that there was a ‘*changeling*’ at his side, tightened and almost slid down the canal’s slope, but Jim merely squeezed his hand on the troll’s arm again as if willing him on. Really, who did Kanjigar think was helping him? Another troll? In the sunlight? It couldn’t have been that much of a shocker if Jim was a changeling … or, far more obviously, a human. But, he wasn’t about to open that can of worms.

“Whelp!” roared Bular. “I know you heard me! Show me your face!”

Stalling, head still down, Jim turned slightly wanting to slight Bular just one time in this life. He knew it was stupid, that he shouldn’t even acknowledge the beast, but he couldn’t smother the fighting spirit he

had acquired as the Trollhunter. And so, Jim called back, “And what would the point of that be? We both know you are completely face-blind from one human to the next. So just accept the pan to the face and that this fight is done today.”

Jim could have sworn that Bular almost fell off the bridge in surprise, now knowing that he had been bested by a mere human. Not that the teenager took time to enjoy it. He instead turned all his attention back to the troll next to him and continued to lead him up the canal’s steep incline. Each and every step after that was stiff as if Kanjigar wanted to bolt like he was afraid that every second he spent with his ‘*human’* guide meant he was one step closer to exposing all troll kind.

Finally, after what felt like literally *forever,* Jim led him out of sight of Bular, even as the Gumm Gumm screamed he was a liar. Not long after, Jim even found a nice large drain pipe. It wasn’t much but it would offer the good troll refute for the entire day. Jim also figured the troll could keep the quilt just in case.

Now, for the hardest part. Jim had to say his peace before he abandoned his old life. All the suffering he had caused in that other life, all the mistakes, he would not allow it to be repeated.

Letting go of the Trollhunter’s arm, Jim quickly stepped out into the light, making sure that his hood was still low.

“You should be safe from the light now,” said Jim, going so far as he put his hands into his pockets and tuck in his chin. He knew that the troll probably had his scent now anyway, but it was easy enough to change his body wash and cologne.

Slowly, Kanjigar peeked from under the blanket as if making sure the human wasn’t lying to him before he allowed the large quilt to hang off of his shoulders. He looked a little gray, but the sun-stain damaged seemed mostly superficial. Jim almost allowed a sigh of relief to escape him but decided to remain silent as the troll eyeballed him. It was certainly strange seeing his predecessor in the flesh.

“Who are you?” finally asked the troll, even though he seemed to be having an internal battle with himself, but it seemed that curiosity won out. “Are you really a human or are you a changeling? And why did you save me?”

Jim decided to forego the first questions and answered simply, “I saved you because you have a fate to fulfil, Trollhunter.”

Jim felt a little ridiculous leaning towards the magic and fate card with this coming conversation, but he guessed it would hold more weight than '*I'm from an alternate time-line'* conversation.

"A fate," said Kanjigar as he tried to take in every detail of the human, his eyes roaming about and his nose inhaling deeply. "Come into the darkness so that I may see the face of my deliverer."

Jim was half tempted to do as he was told, Kanjigar's voice holding a type of authority it never had in death. He now understood why Draal admired his father. There was just this air around him. Jim was almost envious. He never had that chiasmic glow to him as Trollhunter. If anything, he was just awkward and skinny legged. Then again, he didn't weight half a ton.

"My face is not what is important Kanjigar the Courageous," said Jim, ignoring the forming frown on the current Trollhunter's face. "The warnings I am about to give you should be your only concern … and the rest can be forgotten about me."

At this point, Jim kind of wondered if he should have brought a cloak for some proper pizzazz or at least a wizard's hat, but his hoodie would have to do. It seemed good enough to keep the troll's attention. Then again, Kanjigar might just be trying to get a better look at his face.

"My first warning is that Arcadia and everyone in it, troll and human alike, is in peril," said Jim, trying to sound ominous while keeping his voice from squeaking. "For there are indeed changelings in Arcadia. Their goal growing with every brick … soon they will once again have Killahead Bridge. It is hidden behind the city's mantel of what has been and is."

Yes, that one was terribly cryptic, but he was pulling things out of his butt at this point. He barely crawled out of bed fifteen minutes ago and ran the whole way here, after all. He hadn't really had a lot of time to think ahead.

Kanjigar nearly rushed forward as if to grab Jim and shake him, but stalled when he was reminded of the light. "What? Who? Where?!"

Jim sorely wanted to say more, but he didn't want to interfere more than was necessary. He might check in, but he didn't want to change events too much. If things proceeded to quickly, Bular might feel threatened and take the bridge elsewhere.

“My second warning,” said Jim, resisting the urge to take a step back further into the sun as he watched a desperate gleam form in the Trollhunter’s eyes. “Is to beware the champion of the Pale Lady. For Strickler will rise him again with but a ring upon his finger.”

Okay, now Jim just felt stupid. He even put Walt Strickler’s name in there which might lead the trolls back to the school and maybe to him, but he was almost done. He could do this.

“The Pale Lady? Wait. You don’t … You don’t mean her assassin?!”

Once again, Jim ignored Kanjigar’s questions and decided to give the hunter a bit of advice as his last warning. Jim might have had many downfalls as Trollhunter, but he had gleaned some things he considered important. Such as counting on his friends.

“My last warning is to be mindful of your companions. For they will carry you and herald you to victory in these ends,” said Jim, his heart aching at the thought of all the friends he was given up. Blinky and Aaarrrgghh would be fine, and Draal at least got some more time with his dad. “And be kind to your son. Don’t push him away anymore … You won’t have forever with him.”

The last part was spoken softly, obviously not part of his warnings, but if it was possible, Kanjigar stepped back as if struck. “M-my son? You mean Draal? No, I can’t drag him into this.”

Jim ignored the plea and instead gathered control over his voice again. “Now, I have given my warnings and must away. Bear them well, for they are heavy.”

Then, before Kanjigar could ask him one more thing or make a grab for him, Jim turned and ran. He ran as hard as he could as tears threatened to prickle at his eyes. He ran away from the weight of the armor and the sword of Merlin. He ran from the trials and tribulations the title Trollhunter had come with. He ran away from Blinky, Aaarrrgghh, and Troll Market. He ran away from all the pain and the suffering. He ran away from the companionship of his friends and found family. He ran away from all that magic, leaving only a warning.

And so was the tale of James the Unbecoming.

Chapter End Notes

I always love a good Groundhog’s Day episode. I was a little

bothered with how stupid Jim was about the whole Unbecoming episode though. I mean, I get not accepting the amulet, but certainly, he must have realized that there were certain incidents that only Toby and he happened upon that a normal troll wouldn't have? Like the museum and the changelings in particularly. I also would think he would be a little more aware of the things he was giving up, like his troll friends and Claire. Plus, quite honestly, I love Draal and his daddy issues. I might even add another chapter or two so that I can go into that. But, as of right now, this is a one-shot.

At the Day's End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The waiting was almost as painful as being sun-stained.

Kanjigar also swore that somehow it had become the longest day of the year and that the sun would never set. The only things he had for comfort was that the sun-staining could have been worst and left him crippled instead of merely in immense discomfort and that the hooded boy had left his not-fur covering.

He believed it was called a blanket by humans. He was also quite sure it would have been delicious, but somehow, he resisted. It was the only thing he had to scent the whelp with and it also brought him a little comfort knowing he could hide under it if a human passed by. Not that he wasn't grateful for the large drainage system he had been placed in, but it was also a dead end since it didn't lead to the main sewer system.

Grabbing a brown glass bottle, he stared at it for a moment before throwing it in his mouth. He chewed almost absent mindedly as he dwelt on what had transpired this morning. For one, he knew it was foolish fighting Bular during sunrise, but he did it anyway because he had been too proud to retreat. Well, he wouldn't make that mistake again. And at least this whole mess was a learning experience. He obviously needed to change his fighting style somewhat. Bular, apparently, was starting to predict his movements.

Yet, in all honesty, most of his thoughts kept falling back to the whelp. The hooded boy was obviously young given the scent to him. Hormones and all. The real question though was if he was a human whelp or a changeling wearing a whelp's skin.

Kanjigar honestly didn't like either option for they both offered some kind of troubling revelations. A young changeling meant Bular got a hold of a new Fetch which could mean more changelings in the near future. Yet, if the boy was merely human, it meant magic was involved and that the hooded boy wasn't lying about his warnings.

Picking up another brown bottle, Kanjigar stared at it for a moment before he sighed and threw it over his shoulder. A resounding crash

filled the tunnel as the bottle smashed in the dark.

Great, he was ruining his own appetite with all these unknown factors. The truth was that he didn't have enough information to make any accurate depictions of who the hooded boy without speaking to him again. He should have grabbed the whelp. He had had the quilt with him. He could have covered himself and reached out to grab the hooded boy or something. If he found the boy again, he would not let him escpae again.

"We will speek again hooded boy," murmured Kanjigar to himself as he stood near the entrance of the large culvert, blanket resting on his shoulders comfortably while he watched a bird land in the grass and tweet. "Luckily, it's a nice day and unlikely to rain. He couldn't have traveled far on foot."

…

Tobias' short legs threatened to give out as he biked uphill as quickly as his stubby legs would allow. He knew that there was no rush. Really, there wasn't, but Jim had been really cryptic and distant in his text messages all day.

For one, Jimbo wouldn't even answer the front door this morning, and then, when Toby went to school by himself, it took until midday for Jim to actually reply via text. And it was a short and distant reply at that:

Sorry I just cant today …

What does that mean? *Just can't*? It sounded like a text message from a gothic kid in the drama club. Angst was not something Jim did very often. Mostly, he would tune up the self pity for a little bit, stress cook, and then get over it. So, this was something else. This was birthday-Jim times like twenty to the negative *poor-me* power with a side of *leave me to die*. Toby would think it was the break-up blues if Jim had anyone to break up with.

Well, there was Claire, but she didn't even know he existed.

Dropping his bike in the grass of Jim's lawn, Toby headed for the front door. Unsurprisingly, it was unlocked and he headed right in, calling out, "Jim? You home?"

He then immediately headed to the kitchen, expecting Jim to be in a usual cooking frenzy, but the room was empty. The teenager frowned,

figuring it was a physical ailment of some type then. He skipped into the living room expecting to see Jim on the living room couch, watching or sleeping to old episodes of Julia Child as the woman's voice echoed softly over the walls.

The couch was empty and the tv was off.

Toby rubbed his chin in confusion and then headed up to Jim's room. It was empty.

The bathroom, as well, was empty. The only evidence was uncapped toothpaste.

The cubbie in the hallway was next, smelling of spices and, "Oooh, s'more pop-tarts."

"Jimmmm," finally whined Toby in exaggerated despair as he took a bite of his pop tart. "Where are you?"

At last, he heard what had to be a sigh and then a muffled voice called out. Toby immediately turned to the door that led to the basement and quickly peaked inside. He hadn't thought to check it since stress-washing wasn't one of Jim's ticks, but here was his best friend covered in a lump of sheets on the basement steps, just staring at the cement below. Tobias immediately felt helpless about whatever was going on for this was highly abnormal.

Coming down the steps regardless, telling himself that he could deal with this because this was Jim after all, Toby sat down next to his oldest friend. It was a tight squeeze, the two of them on one wooden step, but Toby hoped it offered some type of silent comfort.

And so, they sat, consumed by the silence and the dim lighting of that basement. Toby didn't know what to say, so he merely finished his pop-tart before brushing off the crumbs and clearing his throat, "Hey, Jim."

Finally looking up, his eyes red-rimmed and puffy, Jim gave a scratchy reply, "Hey, Tobes."

Awkwardly, Tobias tapped his pointer fingers together as he struggled for something to say.

Finally, shrugging, he waved to the basement around them. "Not that I'm judging you on your local in which to play sick Jim, but I personally would have picked the attic myself. Mustier, darker, and

likely full of raccoons or bats instead of salamanders. You probably could have gotten all week off for rabies shots."

Despite his horrible day, for what he had really lost was just starting to settle in, Jim smiled and chuckled sadly. "The attic, huh? I don't know Tobes. Less likely to be black mold up there."

"Pffff, but what of the joys of asbestos, Jim? So many more options when it comes to dying," said Toby in a joking manner, a smile on his face despite the heaviness in the air. "But, real talk time … did your dad call or something? You know you can talk to me about that stuff. You don't have to hide."

Jim sighed and leaned forward on his knees, staring at the sleeves of the grey Arciadia High hoodie he still had on. He should really take this off and wash it or, better yet, burn it, but he liked this hoodie too much for that. It was well worn and fell just right on his skinny form. It was familiar and safe.

"I know, Tobes. And no, he didn't contact me or try to send another birthday card or anything. It's just … I feel like I wasted a part of my life," finally admitted Jim to himself as well as Toby. "I feel like I made a whole bunch of bad choices and even when I made it all right, it's still wrong. Everyone should be happier and safer, except for me. And its selfish to think that way and I know I shouldn't, for the many outweigh the needs of the few, but I feel selfish anyway. And, it feels like … Well … I feel like my dad left me all over again but this time it was actually me that did the leaving and no one even noticed."

The words escaped Jim like word-vomit, but he felt a hundred pounds lighter. He had no idea if that made any sense to Tobes at all, but his best friend merely nodded and said, "That's deep Jim … but I think it's a bit too early for us to be having a midlife crisis. How about we pool our allowances together and get some pizza delivered. Getting some food in you will make you feel better. Unless you want to stress cook, that is?"

Jim smiled sadly as he realized just how little Tobes had changed. He was almost the same. So, he could only nod. He had to remember that he still had Toby and his mom. He could do this. He could live these last few months again. He could win Claire back and Kanjigar could keep the troll-world safe. Everyone was going to be fine.

Releasing a shaky breath, he allowed Toby to wiggle free and then help him to his feet. Toby then basically pushed him up the steps.

He was going to be okay. He could do this. Plus, he was kind of hungry. He should be celebrating his *retirement* after all. Unlike all his predecessors, he at least got out of the gig alive.

…

Kanjigar wandered back to the entrance of the culvert, ready for the darkness to claim the world. He even wore the quilt like a scarf so he wouldn't forget it. He would admit this, waiting all day for the sun to set gave him a lot of time to think. He dwelled on new ways to deal with Bular and, of course, the hooded boy. He also had to spend the entire day resisting the urge to pick at his chipping sun-stained skin. It was just cracking everywhere as a painful reminder of his near-failure. Sleep would likely escape him for the next few days because of its irritation.

Not that he would have time for silly things like sleep or pain with a boy and Bular to track down.

So, watching the sun drown in the darkness, he readied himself for a hard couple of days. He didn't even get to wander three feet into the darkness though when a familiar face and voice popped around the corner of the culvert, "Master Kanjigar! Thank the Heartstone! We found you and you're alive! We heard the battle and Bular's roars, but when we got to a sewer's opening … you were gone. We feared the worst."

Somehow bidding his armor to keep from flickering on due to the sudden surprise, for who wanted to admit that Blinkous snuck up on them, Kanjigar slumped slightly in relief at seeing his two friends and trainers.

"Oh, Blinky, Aaarrrgghh. It is good to see a friendly face," said Kanjigar as he ignored Aaarrrgghh friendly smelling his head before poking at his arm for a moment. It did look terrible after bleeding all day. Maybe a midnight hunt through town would have to wait until tomorrow.

"What happened?" said Blinky as he eyeballed Kanjigar's cracking skin and lacerated arm, the small group immediately heading back to Troll Market. "Better question, how did you get away? The sun was rising."

"Well, that's something Vendel would probably like to hear as well. And since I know you and him will likely be berating me with many questions, I would appreciate only telling the tale once," said Kanjigar with a slight smirk.

Blinky gave him a side glace as he helped navigate Aaarrrgghh and the Trollhunter through lightless areas as light poles started to flicker to life. Wanting to distract Blinky, for he swore the troll could smell a conspiracy theory a mile away, Kanjigar asked almost grimly, “Tell me of my son? How was he during my absence?”

Stalling as he peeked into the canal, the spillway blessedly close even though the walk had felt so much longer in the daylight, Aaarrrgghh answered this time. “He was moody.”

“Yes, his frustration with your missing whereabouts was nearly palpable. It obviously wore on him all day,” added Blinky as he slid down the incline, heading forward to open the gate to Troll Market. “He spent most of the day in the Hero’s Forge, training vigorously.”

Nodding, his mind having run circles around all of the hooded boy’s warning, the last one had slowly started to become the most ominous to Kanjigar: *Don’t push him away anymore … You won’t have forever with him.*

It felt like a premonition and a dark omen mixed into one. For it sounded like Draal and he would be separated, and he feared the hooded boy was hinting at something bigger than a falling out. It felt like a promise that one of them was destined to die soon.

Or … was he supposed to die today in the sun?

Kanjigar tightened as the realization hit him like a semi-truck. Aaarrrgghh noticed almost immediately, the large pacifist looking at him with a worried glance. “You okay? Are you in pain?”

Waving off pacifist’s worry, Kanjigar tried to reassure his old friend. “No, no. Everything is fine. Nothing to concern yourselves with.”

Now both of his trainers were looking at him, both of their faces morphing into varying levels of concern. Oh, right. He forgot. He was a terrible liar. Everyone said it was his noble nature, but it seemed more an inconvenience then a positive characteristic.

Sighing, for he knew that Blinky would dog him the whole way to the Heartstone and Aaarrrgghh would give him this betrayed pout the whole time as well, the Trollhunter relented as he was ushered into the entrance. “Really, it’s nothing. I’m just … concerned.”

“That sounds bad,” said Aaarrrgghh as he helped lead the bleeding and sun-stained troll into the market. He hoped they took the long

way to Vendel's. He wanted as few trolls to see him in this state as possible.

"Concerned? By what? It is not the first time you have exchanged blades with Bular and earned a scar. You got your fair share of strikes in as well, I gander," said Blinky. Mostly, unconcerned. It wasn't often that Kanjigar came back bleeding, but it did happen. Bular had killed a few Trollhunters in his time, after all, and wasn't considered an easy opponent.

Frowning, part of him wanting to keep his thoughts to himself, Kanjigar found he was unable to keep his worries clenched behind his teeth a moment longer with the way Aaarrrgghh was looking at him. "But, what if I did not come back, Blinky? I almost perished in the sun this morning. Who would the amulet pick as worthy then? My son? Is he worthy? Or, more importantly, is he ready? I fear in keeping him distant, I have crippled him in some way."

The silence that followed after was deafening as neither of his trainers knew what to say.

Finally, smiling weakly as he started ushering them forward again, Blinky stated, "Well, you didn't perish today, my friend. Your concern is unwarranted, but if you would like to spend more time training Draal, I see nothing wrong with it."

Nodding, glad that both of the other trolls understood so readily, the orange glow of the Heartstone was soon beating down on Kanjigar's cracking skin. He almost cringed, though, as they started crossing the final bridge to the Heartstone. Vendel was already standing there looking sorely irritated. Someone must have seen them and sent news ahead that the Trollhunter had had his rear-end handed to him. It didn't matter how noble or respected Kanjigar's name became as Trollhunter. He still felt somewhat like a whelp in Vendel's presence.

"Oh, the gods in the earth, release me from idiot Trollhunters," grumbled Vendel as he gripped his staff and pointed to the area he used for healing.

Aaarrrgghh merely smiled bashfully and Blinky merely laughed humorlessly as they rushed ahead. Kanjigar would generally shrug it off, but he didn't have time to humor the old goat. He needed to speak to Vendel about something besides of the state of his body.

"Vendel, can the treatment wait? There is something I need to speak to you about," he tried to interject.

The aging troll merely raised a brow, “Is Troll Market in immediate danger?”

“… No, but –”

“Blinky!” barked Vendel as he completely ignored whatever the Trollhunter was going to finish saying. “Start the molten metal while you are over there! Make it nice and hot so that our dear Trollhunter might learn something. I haven’t even looked at him and I already see untreated sun-stains. Pah. Someone as old as yourself should know better than to pick a fight before sunrise, Kanjigar.”

Kanjigar wanted to defend his case, but he was all but plopped on the stone examination slab by a smiling Aaarrrgghh.

“Uh, thank you Aaarrrgghh,” said Kanjigar, feeling like he was being ignored. “As I was saying Vendel, I have a serious concern.”

“Then out with it already. I’m not getting any younger and it’s not like you are going anywhere until that arm is treated,” said Vendel as he started poking at the wound on Kanjigar’s arm.

Sighing, having wanted to go over this with more tact, the blue troll decided to just blurt out what happened, “I was hoping someone could get something to write with before I forgot all his exact words, but if you insist Vendel. I almost perished this morning. In fact, I would have been turned to stone if … a hooded boy hadn’t intervened.”

Vendel’s grouchy expression morphed into one of horror as the word *boy* resonated in his head. “You were seen?! Kanjigar, how could you be so irresponsible?! I expect that of Blinky and Aaarrrgghh, but you? You are supposed to be the responsible one of the merry band of idiots.”

Kanjigar sighed as Vendel fell into full drama mode.

Blinky and Aaarrrgghh merely looked insulted.

“It wasn’t as if I could have hidden, Vendel. The sun was already beneath the bridge. Besides, I feel it wouldn’t have mattered either way. I am quite certain that the hooded boy long knew Bular and I were going to be there. After all, he came prepared,” defended Kanjigar.

“What do you mean by he came prepared?” said Blinky, already smelling a conspiracy theory.

“I mean,” said Kanjigar as he removed the quilt from his throat as if presenting it as evidence. “When I *fell* from the bridge into the light below … a hooded boy saved me with this human patch-blanket. He threw it over my body before the light could barely touch me. And, even before that, I believe he tried to help me in battle. He threw a cauldron at Bular’s face. In fact, he was quite insulted by the audacity.”

Now all three trolls were looking at him like he had just grown a second head. Well, he supposed he had wanted them to listen. That is until Blinky laughed lamely, his face transforming into one of strained humor. “Ha, ha. That was most unexpected, Master Kanjigar. Very funny. You almost had us all fooled, but is this really the best time for a humorous jest?”

“Joke. Not. Funny,” agreed Aaarrrgghh.

“This is no prank. In fact, that isn’t even everything. When I was gathering myself under the patch-blanket, Bular was calling the hooded boy a changeling, though the boy claimed to be merely human,” added Kanjigar as he watched Vendel’s face morph into further dismay. “But, the most concerning event is what happened after the boy led me to the shadows. He … gave me three warnings.”

“Warnings? What could possibly be worse than changelings?” groused Vendel, seeming to be caught on that word alone as he closed his eyes and started to rub his forehead as if a migraine was coming on.

Hating himself, but not willing to sugar coat it, he simply said, “Killahead bridge.”

“What?!” said Vendel as his eyes snapped back open while Blinky merely dropped his pot of melting metal. “It was scattered! If this really is jest Kanjigar, it is in poor taste.”

Sighing, suddenly feeling very tired, the Trollhunter added, “I wish it was, but it was one of the hooded boy’s warnings. Apparently, its being gathered here in Arcadia. In fact, all of the warnings sounded almost like a premonition. It was made even more troubling when the hooded boy would not say his name nor show his face. He was adamant that I take his warnings and forget him.”

Vendel sighed and covered his face for a moment with one of his paws as if to gather himself.

Releasing a breath, leaning on his staff heavily, the old troll groused,

“Of course you brought a prophecy back as well. Why not? Now, do you recall these warnings word for word, Kanjigar? For a false prophet seeks attention and glory, yet a true prophet asks that their face is forgotten. They rarely ask for their burden … and usually try to escape it.”

“I’d say,” murmured Kanjigar. “He ran like a scarred rabbit after he gave his three warnings. He didn’t dare come within reaching distance either once I was in the shadows.”

“Did you see any defining features? I know most humans look the same but did you at least see what direction he went in?” said Vendel as his face wore down in worry. “If he really is a prophet we cannot afford to leave him out there with the likes of Bular around.”

“Agreed. We can’t let Bular get ahold of him first, changleling or not. Though I regrettably did not see his face, he seemed to be in schooling ages still given the mole banner on his hooded shirt. He also smelled of hormones, puberty, and this odd after-scent of human spices for some reason. I most assuredly got his scent, so I could probably track him as soon as this arm is patched up,” said Kanjigar as if readying himself to jump off the slab as soon as his arm laceration was dealt with. “The blanket also carries his scent somewhat so Aaarrrgghh could probably assist me.”

Smiling, Aaarrrgghh took the quilted and inhaled deeply like he was trying to eat it through his nose. “Mmm. Spicy smell and … like human hospital. More than one person on this.”

Frowning, Kanjigar agreed, “Yes, probably someone else close to him, but both scents will likely lead to his whereabouts regardless.”

“Agreed,” said Vendel. “Now, Blinky get something to write with so we can jot down what Kanjigar recalls-“

“Already on it,” said Blinky as he pulled some parchment out of his side satchel. “Oh, this is exhilarating. A possible premonition as I live and breathe.”

“And Aaarrrgghh, grab some healing herbs and send for someone with a good nose,” finished Vendel as he started poking at Kanjigar’s wound again despite the confused look covering the Trollhunter’s face.

“Send for someone? But, I have the boy’s scent.”

“You also are in no condition to take on Bular if you run into him out there. You need to heal and rest, Kanjigar. These sun-stains especially need some time to heal,” said Vendel almost sympathetically. “Now, Aaarrrgghh, those herbs and maybe you should call on that fool friend of Draal’s. BaaAch, I believe. That idiot needs something *constructive* to fill his time with. Plus, Draal should be capable of keeping them both in line and unseen above ground.”

Kanjigar went stiff and had to snap his jaw shut to keep from shooting down Vendel’s suggestion. He knew Vendel was correct. BaaAch had a very good nose despite running into walls all the time, and Draal would also keep the other troll inline up there. It was a good choice and quite honestly, the hooded boy’s last warning was still ringing in his head. He couldn’t keep pushing his son away from this. He couldn’t keep sheltering him.

So, as much as his fatherly side wanted to rage and keep his whelp hidden away, Kanjigar sighed and nodded.

“What, no challenge? I was certain you wanted to keep Draal sheltered forever?” said Vendel as he started placing some tools on the stone slab.

Kanjigar merely gave the older troll a dejected look and muttered, “He is no longer a child.”

Despite himself, Vendel smiled warmly, “Well, it’s about time you let that whelp out from under you, Kanjigar. You can’t nest him forever. Acknowledging that your brood has grown up is no easy task for any parent. This will be good for him and you.”

His hands becoming fists on his knees, Kanjigar admitted, “I have little choice, Vendel. It … was one of the warnings.”

“Speaking of warnings,” said Blinky as Aaarrrgghh came back with jars and jars of herbs. “Shall we write them down before the details escape you?”

Beside himself, Kanjigar sighed again. Blinky was far too excited about this and when Blinky got excited, it was a lesson in tolerance.

Chapter End Notes

> Yeah, I have a few ideas … as you all can tell by this here update. In this chapter, we get some light Jim angst and moody Vendel. I really liked that old goat. What can I say? I love cancerous older

characters. Also, I had fun playing with Kanjigar's character. We really don't get a lot of screen time with him, so he was fun to develop. I figured if he was friends with Blinky, he must have had some quirks despite his shining example as a Trollhunter.

Regardless, next chapter has an irritated Bular and very confused Strickler in it. Just thinking about it makes me giggle.

Edit: Also, ChasetheFreackinStars made a playlist for this fic. I sometimes nap to it. https://playmoss.com/en/chaseastar/playlist/frying-pans-and-fates

Pots and Pains

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kanjigar tried not to twitch as Vendel finished cleaning the wound on his arm, Blinky busily berating him for every word he repeated of the three warnings. In fact, his wounds were almost forgotten entirely when he first said the three warnings. That is until Aaarrrgghh decided to place the boiling cauldron of metal on the slab beside him, prompting Vendel into action. It seemed that Aaarrrgghh was going to be Vendel's assistant in this test of torture instead of Blinky and his smaller fingers. That meant it was probably going to hurt like a beast … and that it was likely to scar.

Wonderful. This night just couldn't get any better.

Well, at least Blinky was there to keep him somewhat distracted with his constant chatter.

Nonetheless, he braced his teeth as Aaarrrgghh held his arm at a straight angle. Vendel didn't even give him a moment's warning before he started to pour molten metal into the wound with a ladle-like tool. Kanjigar didn't know if he should have been grateful or not for Aaarrrgghh's steady grip. After all, the deeper the wound, the more *unpleasant*. Nonetheless, Kanjigar did his best to keep from twitching away or less Vendel spill. And quite honestly, a berating from Vendel seemed more intolerable than the sting of a filling wound.

"And you are certain that the first warning ended with: It is hidden within the city's *something-something* has been and is?" said Blinky as he looked at the revisions of the warnings he had been hashing out. "Is *something-something* a technical term, Kanjigar?"

Aaarrrgghh chuckled at the comment and Kanjigar rolled his eyes.

Vendel merely sighed and stopped pouring the molten metal, taking out a sculpting tool to help nudge the dripping metal into place. "Really, Kanjigar. You remembered every verse to the Halljikar Battle Sonnet while in a drunken stupor, but not all the words to a prophet's warnings?"

Again, Aaarrrgghh chortled at Kanjigar's embarrassing incident that

everyone refused to forget about while, as usual, Blinky encouraged his learning of battle sonnets. “Ah yes, Master Kanjigar, the Halljikar Battle Sonnet. A classic tale of combat and romance. You should really learn the rest in the series. They are all exceptional and quite a hit with the ladies I hear.”

Kanjigar squished the urge to hide his face in shame. Instead, he groused, “The boy didn’t hand me parchment when he rehearsed his warnings, and he certainly didn’t give me much forewarning that he would be telling me anything of such monumental importance. Forgive me for not memorizing every utterance out of his mouth.”

“You are forgiven,” said Blinky in all seriousness, “But are you certain you cannot remember the exact words? You remembered the last warning word for word.”

Frowning, wondering if this practice in torture would ever end, Kanjigar grumbled, “The last one was far more *personal* Blinky.”

“Of course, of course. Completely understandable,” said Blinky as he tried to smooth over any insult. “Now, can you repeat all three warnings – to the best of your ability, of course - while *enunciating* every vowel?”

Truthfully, the only thing Kanjigar wanted to enunciate was *NO* with fourteen *O’s* before stomping away half treated to his private rooms to finish wrapping his wounds, but he knew that was below the title of Trollhunter. Ten O’s would be sufficient.

“Hello? Vendel? We were summoned?” finally came a voice.

Kanjigar nearly sighed. Thank the Hearthstone. A distraction. Sad was the day that he needed his son to protect him from Blinky.

“Father, you are here,” said Draal as he walked completely into Vendel’s healing area, relief on his face.

Vendel, looking up from his work on Kanjigar’s arm, squinted accusingly, “And BaaAch didn’t see fit to join you? How abnormal. He is usually your shadow and I recall asking for him specifically.”

“He was just behind me, Vendel, and if this is still about Reggs Bridge being painted black, he was with me that day training. Besides, anyone that thought they got a black-hoof curse from a bridge is being a fool anyway. Everyone knows you have to walk in a stream backward to get that,” said Draal with a frown as he eyed his father’s

cracking sun-stained skin.

For a moment he moved to touch it but resisted. He had never been sun-stained himself, but he heard it could be crippling if not treated. “Is … this serious?”

“He should live,” grumbled Vendel. “*Unfortunately*. Now, go grab that idiot companion of yours while I finish this arm. You two have a job you must do tonight.”

Draal watched Vendel finish shaving off some sharp edges to the mostly cooled metal before tapping it slightly with one of his claws for weak spots, he then murmured for Aaarrrgghh to get the other melting pot before he turned those dull claws to his father’s shoulder, carefully chipping at a loose piece of sun-stained flesh.

“Are you sure he is fine?” said Draal suddenly feeling defensive of his father. He knew his father could take care of himself, but watching him twitch under Vendel touch while grinding his teeth, Draal suddenly felt … exposed. He knew it was an expectation that one day he would replace his father as Trollhunter, yet at the same time, he hadn’t completely accepted what that meant … until right now.

His father would have to die.

“Hold please,” suddenly said Aaarrrgghh as he came up behind Draal and handed him a piping hot cauldron.

Floundering as he took the material, Draal was almost unable to look away from the sudden frailty of his father. So, instead, the younger troll forced himself to look down at the hot metal under his nose. He immediately noticed it was a much softer metal than was generally used for lacerations like on his father’s arm. In fact, it looked like some kind of lithium mix … which probably explained the leather strips Aaarrrgghh had just grabbed and was laying out on the stone slab. It looked like Vendel was going to use light flexible metals to cover the damaged skin and to fill in the growing cracks. Then, after some minor cooling, they probably were going to cover that weak metal in leather strips dipped in medical herbs.

Given that his father’s skin had already started to flake off on his higher shoulder’s and neck, this was probably going to be a painful treatment. He now understood why he had been summoned. His father would likely be stuck in-chambers for a few days to rest. Even thinking of being trapped in his bed-furs for a day unnerved Draal. He didn’t know how his father was going to handle it.

Swallowing, suddenly feeling like a whelp, Draal tried to push away the reminder that his father was mortal. And that his father could be broken and chipped. In fact, his father could have died this morning … Yet, Draal had not truly done anything worthy of his father's recognition.

"Draal," said Vendel, somehow piercing through the younger troll's thoughts. "Kanjigar will be fine. Now, go. We haven't all night. Find that hairy excuse you call your shadow."

Turning away from the sight of his injured father, unable to watch a moment more, Draal didn't even walk across the bridge when he found BaaAch hiding behind a cluster of large crystals. His orange fur actually blended in rather nicely with the tangerine crystals at first glance, but, as usual, his moose-like horns gave him away. He did not have the natural blending capabilities of his mother's tribe from the Canadian and Alaskan wilderness … such as the white fur. Besides that, BaaAch was all Wendo tribe. He had a sensitive nose and was fur covered like an ox. He was perfect for hunting and surviving in the Alaskan wilderness ... Too bad he was Heartstone orange like his father.

"BaaAch," said Draal as he stalled there and crossed his arms over his chest, picking up a stance his father used whenever verbally disciplining any of the citizens of Troll Market. He could do this. His father was fine. There was still time and this was an opportunity to gain his father's favor. He was going to get this done … if BaaAch didn't mess this up for both of them.

"Draal," said BaaAch as he continued to badly hide there.

An awkward moment passed between them before Draal pushed his concern down completely and grumbled, "You really aren't going to deny Vendel's summons, are you? He asked for you by name. My fath- I mean the Trollhunter obviously made the request."

Blowing the hair out of his eyes, the hairy troll stood and crossed his arms over his own chest in a show of defiance. "You mean your *father*? I rather doubt it's an actual summons for service, Draal. He always gives me this disproving look whenever we are in the Hero's Forge. You know the one where his eyes kind of look cross-eyed. He thinks I'm incompetent. Most likely … today is the *reckoning*, Draal, and I will *not* go quietly into the light. I will leave something to be remembered by."

Draal rolled his eyes. “One: my father isn’t cross-eyed, and two: he doesn’t care about the graffiti you put all around-”

“Street art, Draal. Its art,” defended BaaAch as he swished the hair out of his eyes again.

Shaking his head, the blue troll grumbled, “Fine, *tasteful* graffiti. Now, come with me before I drag you. I am not messing this up because of your paranoid theory that Vendel is after you. You are worse than Blinky.”

BaaAch reared back as if struck. “I. Am. Not! Take that back or taste my fist, Draal son of Kanjigar.”

Draal looked surprised for a moment before a smirk crept on his face. He was not above a healthy spar, but before he could even stalk a circle around his opponent, Vendel was standing next to them, making both younger trolls jump. “Ah, there he is. I knew Draal’s shadow wouldn’t be far behind, though, I’m half surprised he didn’t fall off the bridge with all that hair in his eyes.”

Looking offended, BaaAch was about to open his mouth when Vendel smacked him in the back off the calf with his staff causing the orange troll to yip and hop forward.

“Now, come along. You have been summoned by the Trollhunter to perform a service to Troll Market … and it will be something more time worthy than *graffiti*, BaaAch son of YeOwh. And don’t ever call that graffiti art again in my presence. You wouldn’t understand composition if it was hanging on your nose. Not that you can even see your nose with all that hair. Really, wasn’t your mother from the Wendo Tribe? Disgraceful. Where are the ceremonial beads you are supposed to wear in your hair? How else are you showing honor to your mother’s tribe? Mange is not the way to do it.”

BaaAch, dumbfounded with how Vendel had managed to hit so hard without even swinging his staff, was all but dragged before the Trollhunter by Draal. Looking at the Trollhunter and his *painful predicament*, he knew this summons was going to suck, especially since Draal seemed so ready to please given he was actually getting his father’s attention for once. The most horrible part had to be when he was given a human blanket and was told he couldn’t eat it. Instead, he was to go gallivanting on the surface, looking for the boy that owned this blanket which might actually be a changeling.

Nonetheless, despite BaaAch’s reluctance, twenty stones later Draal

and him both stood at Troll Market's entrance, the entrance quietly closing behind them. Draal's face revealed nothing but confidence and determination. BaaAch, meanwhile, merely blew his bangs out of his eyes apprehensively before he felt compelled to ask the most important question at hand, "So, Draal, they said to follow the boy's scent and not the female's scent on the blanket, right?"

"Yes, they did say that. They also said that the boy might be a changeling. Thus, the bags," said Draal as he threw a bag over his shoulder, feeling like the villain Krumpus: the famous child stealer. Nonetheless, he tugged at the blanket around BaaAch's neck, nearly strangling the other troll with it as he inhaled the scents on it. He knew his nose wasn't as good as BaaAch's, but he wanted to do this as quickly as possible. Dragging a possible changeling into Troll Market was not sitting well with him, but it was better than letting Bular find him first. Apparently, the whelp had some very important information. What exactly, Vendel didn't elaborate.

Tugged the scarf-quilt back with a grunt, BaaAch finally asked the one question on his mind, "And, perchance, do you know which scent is the boys? I've never been able to tell the difference between human girls and boys."

Draal, sucking in a breath, sighed before dropping both of his arms to the side like limp noodles, "Neither … do I. Humans all look the same to me."

"Sooo … just pick a scent?"

"Yeah, just pick one," said Draal, secretly hoping that one human would lead to the other.

…

Walt Strickler sighed as he entered the museum entrance through the service door. The sun had barely set and he was already being summoned to the museum by Bular. For goodness sake, he didn't even think the museum was completely closed yet. Wasn't Nomura watching him?

Probably not … given Bular had eaten his last two handlers, but that left to question: who had sent the text message then?

Strickler, binder under one arm and a thermos of tea in the other, stalled in confusion for a moment. His back became ramrod straight as he digested the question, his face taking on an expression of utter

horror as his lip turned upward.

Certainly, Bular didn't know how to text, did he? No, no. That was utterly preposterous. Though the thought of Bular trying to google something was somewhat amusing, he doubted the troll had the dexterity for it. Smartphones and their touch screens especially wouldn't work given a troll's skin.

As for a flip phone, perhaps … if Bular's fingers weren't the size of sausages with shark-teeth sized claws. And furthermore, even if he could extract the patience to learn how to use a flip phone, where would he keep such a device? In his loincloth?

Strickler twitched at the thought and immediately banished all thoughts of Bular trying to even comprehend the technologies of modern day society. Instead, he picked up his pace to the closed display where Killahead Bridge was being put together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Turning the corner, he gasped as he nearly walked into something at eye-level, dropping his tea and binder with a resounding clang as papers flew everywhere.

Face morphing into irritation as his thermos spilled its contents all over the waxed museum floor and his student's work, Strickler stared at the back of a … cooking pan? The offensive item having nearly smacked him right in the face.

Slowly, his gaze traveled upward to the bulky arm holding said pan. For a moment, Bular and Strickler both exchanged a glance, the troll giving him an expectant glare as if Strickler knew what the pot meant.

Doubting that this was the sign that Bular might pick up some table manners or learn the culinary arts, Strickler stepped backward to distance himself from the dented cookware, brushing his suit-vest for a moment as he regained his composure. Then, pressing his fingers together, Strickler inquired, "Is there a particular reason you are presenting me with this dented cookware, Bular? You must forgive me if its *relevance* escapes me."

Snorting angrily, the troll pointed a claw at the bottom of the well-used pan, the blackened metal nearly hiding the brand. "Tell me about this Rachael Ray. She must know who the intruding whelp was."

Strickler … slow blinked. He then stared at his tea spreading farther away on the floor like a growing puddle of confusion. For a moment,

he wondered if someone had poisoned it and these were to be his last confusing moments. Yet, when he didn't immediately fall to the floor as a twitching mass, the changeling quickly tried to find a way of answering the question without completely insulting Bular's intelligence.

Some snide comments were worth possible disembowelment … others were not. Pick your battles wisely as they say.

"You can find her in most department stores," answered Strickler flippantly "Have you decided to pick up the culinary arts, Bular? I heard that stoneware is to die for."

The troll snorted in disgust and then nodded, "To this department store then. We will find this Rachael Ray and torture her until she tells me the identity of the whelp."

Strickler nearly choked on his own tongue, the mental image of Bular walking up the service desk and eating the help making him flounder for something else to say, "Now, really. We don't need to incite a panic by eating Walmart employees, what does this piece of cheap cookware have to do with a whelp? If you were seen, wouldn't it be easier to smell out the poor fool then causing mass hysteria of the lower class? The last thing we need is a poorly educated populace wandering around on a witch hunt. More than one changeling has met their end that way."

The troll growled and got into Strickler's face, drool dribbling down the side of his maw. "Do you not think I already thought of that?! I cannot get a scent off of this piece of metal. It smells too painfully of charred grease. There is nothing to be had off of it … And for all I know, it was a changeling and not a human. The hooded whelp knew better than to show his face and seemed fearless in the presence of me. If it was one of your *impure* and they took Kanjigar's death from me … know that more than just they will pay for this betrayal."

Staring at the well-used piece of cookware as if it was a death warrant, Strickler frowned wondering if this was a mess he was going to have to clean up. It also brought to question what kind of person carried around cookware to throw at a troll. A changeling? Unlikely, but who else would have the gall to attack a troll instead of merely wetting themselves and running away?

"I rather doubt anyone would betray you, Bular, especially so close to the completion of Killahead bridge," said Strickler quickly as those red

eyes started to glow with impatience. “It likely was a passing vagabond. They sleep in the shadows of the city and carry such trinkets … though I was sure you had eaten most of them already.”

“It was not one of the homeless,” growled Bular, well-acquainted with the taste of the destitute and their worldly possessions since no one ever noticed their absence. “He smelled like a normal human whelp instead of unwashed flesh. He also had one of those rats on his hooded shirt.”

Walt followed Bular’s pointing finger down to his binder which had the Arcadia High mascot on it, smiling in all its mole-glory. Immediately, he felt his stomach plummet. A passing vagrant probably wouldn’t be wearing the local fanfare.

Sighing, Walt grumbled, “Well, that’s just wonderful. Most of the student body and at least half of their parents have Arcadia merchandise. It’s been a real pushing point for the new jumbotron they have been trying to get. You couldn’t have given a broader description if you had tried, Bular. You probably didn’t even catch their gender!”

Yet, before the changeling could say more on his rant, Bular grabbed him by the front of his suit jacket, growling deeply as he got in close and personal. “I told you, his face was covered. He had a grey hooded shirt with that rat banner on it. You are going to help me find him … alive. He seemed far too prepared and fearless for my liking, but what bothers me the most was that he knew Kanjigar’s name and title. I wouldn’t be surprised if he knew my name as well. Find him.”

Nodding, before being dropped in his tea and student papers, Walt wondered if it was a student. And if so … what had they gotten themselves into? There were quicker and far less painful ways to die in this world.

Chapter End Notes

> I don’t know why, I just love describing medical care in fics. I’d say it has something to do with my love of Ratchet from Transformers. The grouchy old medic will always have a soft spot in my fandom heart. Nonetheless, next chapter is obviously about Draal and BaaAch. Speaking of which, I loved writing Draal in this. He obviously idolizes his father and being reminded that his father is just as mortal as any troll has to be a real eye-opener. Poor thing … it’s not his fault I’m an angst vampire. (OvvO)

Hit and Run

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barbara sighed and leaned against the nurses' desk, taking a breather for a moment. It had been a long day. Her schedule had been so hectic lately that she was honestly sure that she hadn't actually seen Jim in three days … and she felt horrible about it. What kind of mother didn't see her child for three days?

She sighed and quickly checked her emails. Her lip twitched when she noticed that there was a note of absence for Jim.

Immediately, she frowned. She was going to stay a few more hours, but why would Jim miss school?

Quickly, she scrolled through her text messages fearing she missed a text from her son stating he was staying home sick. She felt she had many shortcomings as a single mother sometimes, but she always made ends meet and always made sure Jim's health was cared for. As a doctor, she felt obliged to make sure her son had the best care.

There were no text messages though.

Dialing Jim's number, hoping it wasn't too late, she listened to three rings before it went to his voicemail. She stared at the screen of her phone as if it was lying to her. Jim rarely didn't answer. She immediately felt ill at ease. Dr. Lance owed her a favor, she supposed, so she was going home early. It probably was nothing more than teen rebellion. She hoped that day would never come, but she remembered being a teenager once.

A few minutes later, she was heading to her car, the headlights flickering on.

Meanwhile, a few blocks away from the hospital parking lot, there were another two bodies wandered the night of Arcadia like lost boys. Their blocky forms ducked through dark alleys and hid behind dumpsters while burlap bags and a quilt trailed after them.

"I tell you, we should have followed the other scent. It smelled more boyish. This one keeps leading farther and farther into the inner dwellings of the city. At least the other one led through the woods

first and likely led to the rows and rows of human dwellings on the other side," said Draal as he ducked behind a dumpster as a car drove by, its headlights reflecting off the dumpster for a moment.

BaaAch sniffed once more before he turned and frowned at the other troll, "Boyish? You said you didn't know the difference in human genders. For all you know, this is the boy's scent we are following."

"And it might not be. For all we know, it's a changeling's trap," grumbled Draal as he sniffed at the air as well. "I still can't believe that Vendel and the others are okay with dragging a human, for that matter, a possible changeling into Troll Market. What information could so important?"

Shrugging, having had this conversation three times since leaving Troll Market, the red troll grumbled, "If they wanted us to know, they would have told us. So, let's just continue this way. Like you said, one human will likely lead to the other. In fact, I think I finally found it. There's something on the wind."

Both of the trolls were suddenly standing up straight and sniffing at the air only to immediately drop back into the shadows when a dinky blue car pulled up the stop light, soft music echoing through the dead streets. The window was open to probably let the cool night air in while an adult brunette human messed around with something in the vehicle. The human, even though they were across the street, smelled like the second scent on the blanket.

BaaAch snorted in irritation, turning to look at Draal, "Well, we found one of the scents. Though … it does not look like a whelp to me. Too big. It's probably the female then."

Draal sighed and looked up at the sky as if begging for patience. "Great. We wasted hours on this scent and we can't just follow her. Those … motor vehicles … can outpace us."

Frowning, watching the woman change the sound coming from the car, BaaAch turned his hairy head to Draal and simply asked, "Why don't we just snatch her instead? We have two bags. We can then make her tell us where the whelp is."

Immediately, the blue brute frowned. He didn't like the idea of being exposed, but at the same time letting down his father was far more distressing. For the Heartstone's sake, his father actually summoned him. He didn't know what he had done to earn his father's sudden attention, but he was not going to let him down.

So, throwing a sack at BaaAch, Draal nodded, “Fine, but let’s make this quick. The street is empty now, but I don’t like how open it is. We don’t want to be seen.”

Waving his arm as a signal to move forward, Draal started creeping towards the back of the vehicle while doing his best to keep out of the lamplight as much as possible. He whispered instructions as he went, the taillights reflecting off of his stone skin. “Disable the wheeled vehicle in some manner. Don’t let her drive off. Meanwhile, I will snatch her while she is looking at you.”

BaaAch nodded and hunched down. Once he was sure that Draal was close enough, the light finally turned green and the wooly troll used his powerful legs to leap forward like a great ape. He then slammed down a second later in the middle of the intersection just as Barbara put her foot on the gas. The woman immediately screamed but didn’t even have time to turn the wheel or brake when the troll slammed his large fists down on the car hood, buckling the metal. The radiator immediately splashed all over the troll’s feet as the airbag went off, causing Barbara to be slammed back and saved by her seatbelt at the same time. Her scream was stolen from her like the air from her lungs.

Draal immediately came forward and peeked through the car window. He watched Barbara’s head lull to the side as she struggled to wheeze, her glasses barely hanging on by one ear. He gave BaaAch a look. “I said stall the car, not try to kill the human.”

BaaAch shrugged, “The motor vehicle hit me.”

Looking at the fist prints in the hood, Draal looked unimpressed. “Sure, it did. Now, help me get her out. There is this metal door is in the way. Plus, there’s now this white marshmallow thing and black strap keeping her in place.”

Completely ignoring the door handle, Draal grabbed the car door from inside the window and tugged. It came out with a squeal, the whole car lurching as the door was ripped from the hinges. Draal wordlessly handed said car door to BaaAch. The red troll, blowing the hair out of his eyes, gladly took the car door. He stared at it for a total of three seconds before he found the rubber seal around the edges and started ripping off the material with his teeth. He munched quite happily at the treat. Draal, meanwhile, tried tugging out the partially inflated airbag.

Barbara, regaining some of her composure, finally pushed her cracked

glasses back onto her nose and turned to the two voices. Her mouth dropped open in horror as two … things … started to rip piece off of her car. She was too shocked to even scream.

“This is taking forever,” growled Draal, the airbag finally coming out. “Why are there so many pieces? Why does this motor vehicle even have a marshmallow to begin with?”

“Well, why don’t we just pull her and the entire chair out? Then we can stuff her and the chair in the bag and eat the chair later,” said BaaAch, eyeing the upholstery hungrily. The not-marshmallow was delicious so the upholstery had to be even better.

Draal, stalling from tugging on the seatbelt, turned back to look at his companion. “It has been a long time since I’ve had upholstery.”

Barbara, finally gathering herself, drew in a panicked breath. She was being attacked by a disfigured … moose? Well, the red one could be a moose, but what was the blue one?! And … now he was staring at her!

“Ah, she’s awake,” said Draal as he reached towards her seat, speaking directly to her. “Now, we have some questions for you human. Just hold still while I pull you out of this metal … puzzle box. I will then put you in a bag and later eat your upholstery.”

The blue troll didn’t even have time tug on the car seat when suddenly Barbara finally gathered herself enough to reach for her pepper spray … and spray it right into the troll’s glowing eyes. The bulky troll immediately reared back, screaming about his eyes. He then collapsed directly into BaaAch and both trolls went down in a mass of limbs and horns.

Barbara, now screaming, slammed on the gas. Crippled the car may be, but it still burned rubber as she drifted around the corner successfully escaping the two trolls.

BaaAch, on his back, blew the hair out of his eyes and watched the car drive off into the night. Draal merely stumbled to his feet, immediately running into a pole as he continued to rub at his eyes.

“She got away,” said BaaAch as he slowly got up to help Draal.

“Oh, did she?! I couldn’t tell given I couldn’t see!” growled Draal, his temper flaring. “Ugghh, that stings!”

“Yeah … it’s really too bad. I was looking forward to having some

upholstery."

Draal merely moaned, wondering if he could make it back to Troll Market half blind. "Please don't remind me, BaaAch."

…

"I'm telling you that a disfigured moose and his blue friend attacked my car, Sargent. They jumped right in front of it and … and they were going to kidnap me and eat my car seat," said Barbara as she dabbed the blood-stained towel on her forehead again.

Sergeant Ben Gulager, standing in the driveway, eyed the two imprints on the car's hood as the woman rambled on in near hysteria. He was honestly surprised she was able to get the car home in this condition. The radiator was basically crushed and he wouldn't be surprised if the insurance company totaled out the car. He knew that the hospital was short in doctors, had been for a while, but was the staff really that overworked that something like a car accident had caused this poor woman to snap?

Obviously, there had been some kind of accident, but given that he hadn't had any other calls about car accidents this evening, he doubted any other vehicles were involved. Though, as bad as he felt for the stressed woman, her son looked even worse. He must have been woken by the noise of his mother's panic-stricken 911 call. Now, in nothing but pjs, the poor teen seemed transfixed with the two circular dents in the hood. It was like he had just come to the realization that his mother was mortal and could have died tonight. Ben wanted to comfort the poor boy but now was not the time.

"Nnnnn-now, calmmm downnn Mrs. Lllake," said Sergeant Gulager, as he shifted the hat on his head, hoping it hid the scar on his head given that his hair piece just refused to stay in place tonight. "I'mmmm sure that it llllooked llllike a disfigured mmmmmoose and b-bbbluee thing, bbbbut it is ddddark out. Wwwwe'll keeppp an eye outttt for llllarge aaannimals though."

"It wasn't an animal. It ripped off my car door for god's sake," said Barbara, half hysterical as she tried to stem the flow of blood from her temple. It wasn't a deep wound, but head wounds were just temperamental things and bled easily. She hadn't even noticed she was bleeding until she got home. Jim had given her a kitchen towel immediately when she had stumbled into the house and had even managed to temper off some of her initial panic when he told her

there was no such thing as talking monsters … even though the boy looked just as horrified as her.

“I-I understand M-mrs. Lake, bbbbut I tttthink we sssshould head to the hhhospital to make sure yyyour okay. I-I’m worried yyyou sustained a hhhhead wound,” said the officer as he pointed to his car.

Barbara opened her mouth as if to defend herself, but stalled when she noticed Jim’s horrified expression as he stared at the bloody head. Mr. Gulager was right, she knew that of course. This all could be something her mind made up due to a head wound. What if she had a bleed in her brain? She should have driven to the hospital first. Not home. If only to spare Jim.

Gritting her teeth, she knew she would never forget the glow of that blue monster’s eyes as it spoke to her. Then again, she would never forget how Mr. Gulager had gotten his head wound. There had been so much blood that night. Pools of it given he had taken a gunshot to the head. So, with a sigh, she relented, “Maybe you are right … maybe it was an animal. I did hit my head.”

Nodding, the officer heading to the cruiser to open the passenger door. Barbara turned to Jim. She touched his arm lightly and seemed to pull him out of whatever thoughts he now harbored. He tried to smile for her at first, but she could tell he was terrified. Not that she blamed him … all they had was each other in this world. She had no siblings and her parents had passed on quietly within a year of each other. There was no one else for Jim. And she honestly didn’t even know if Jim’s father would take him in. He had a new life … why would he want something from the old one?

“I’m going to head to the hospital with Mr. Gulager. They will probably keep me for observation, but everything’s going to be just fine Jim,” said Barbara encouragingly as he gave him a hug, pulling back and kissing him on the forehead. He looked even more petrified now like something had just crawled out of his nightmares.

Mr. Gulager, as if sensing Jim’s attitude, called over, “S-ssshe’s going to be jjjust fine, son. Jjjust fine. Yyyyyou head up to bed.”

Jim slowly nodded as if in acceptance but his fingers seemed to linger on Barbara’s scrubs before she turned and walked to the car. He then stood on the curb like a lost child as the cruiser’s taillights disappeared into the night.

Truthfully, Jim wasn’t worried about his mom being okay. He had had

headwounds worse than that thanks to his time as a Trollhunter, but something had found her in the night. That something … was probably a troll. He didn't know which or who, but he suspected the why…

His grandmother's blanket.

Mom used that blanket a lot when she passed out on the couch. More so than him. This was his fault, wasn't it?! Why wouldn't that dark world just let him go?

Kicking the grass, unable to look at the dents in the car's hood a moment more, the teenager headed inside. He needed to hide mom's scent and his own. First, he needed to clean the house with bleach and change the laundry soap. Mom was probably going to lose her perfume collection, and he would have to spray the yard outside. Hopefully, all the chemical smells of cleaner and pesticides could hide the house from the trolls. He didn't know if it would work, but he had to do something.

And so, on his hands and knees bleaching the floor, Jim spent the rest of the night cleaning … sleep completely escaping him. He didn't know what he was going to do about the trolls if they found his mom again, but maybe a little misdirection was in order. Anything to keep them away from his mother. Luckily, he still had his old hockey equipment in the garage. The mask would be useful. He didn't look forward to looking like a serial killer as he ran through the night, but if playing bait kept everyone away from his home. He'd do what he had to.

After all, after making a timeline in his head, Jim realized he missed a warning. There was still the Fetch to worry about and Enrique. Kanjigar was probably a fine Trollhunter, but he didn't care about Claire the way Jim did … and he sure wouldn't go into the dark lands for her baby brother either. Kanjigar likely cared about the many over the few. It was practical, he knew, but it still stung to know the truth.

So … maybe there was one more thing to do in the troll world. Hopefully, he could throw everyone off his mom's scent at the same time.

"Everything will be fine," said Jim to himself as he continued to scrub all the floors on his hands and knees even though there was a perfectly good mop in the closet. "I'll clean this up, mom. I'll take care of everything. I promise. I'm never dragging you into that world again

… never. I'll also save Enrique and then I'll never bother with that world again. I promise."

On the counter, a barely used hokey mask stared at him silently as if it didn't believe him. Turning to stare at those empty eye holes, Jim felt like he didn't believe his own words either. It hadn't even been a full day and already the troll world was dragging him back in. Well, he wasn't going down without a fight. It would have to drag him in … kicking and screaming.

Chapter End Notes

> I love Draal and BaaAch and their terrible planning in this. Poor Barbara is going to be paranoid as fuck now as well. As for the Fetch and Not-Enrique, I figure Jim doesn't know that he caused that event. So, for all he knows, Not-Enrique was always supposed to happen.

After School

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, well. How am I not surprised? You two came home empty-handed,” grumbled Vendel as BaaAch helped a stumbling Draal into the healing dwell. “… And injured apparently.”

“I told him it was nothing,” grumbled Draal as he rubbed his eyes, only to hiss in discomfort.

“You said it hurt like a medieval mace to the face. Plus, you couldn’t see,” said BaaAch as he led his friend to the examination slab and basically pushed him into sitting down.

Frowning, twitching as Vendel came over and tilted his head up to get a look at his red and watering eyes, Draal almost pouted, “It told you it hurt *at first* like a mace to the face. Then, after I rubbed my eyes, it hurt like a thousand tiny little steel maces which repeatedly poked at my eyes. It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Both Vendel and BaaAch shared a sideways glance.

BaaAch was the first to comment, “What if she spat acid in your eyes and they are slowly melting? I mean, she was female. Isn’t that how they protect their young by screaming and spitting at you?”

Draal, though it was very hard for a troll to cry, felt a new stream of tears fall down his cheek as he tried to squint at the other two trolls. “Human’s don’t spit acid … do they?”

Vendel, shining a crystal in each eye, hummed, “No, they do not. In fact, I think there might be something missing in both of your educations. Remind me to tell Blinky. As for … Wait.” He stalled and then barked, “What?! You two were seen by humans as well? Why don’t we just parade down main street for the whole town, the way you band of fools are going at it.”

Beside himself, Draal twitched as he tried to defend himself, “It wasn’t just any human, Vendel. It was the female scent from the blanket. We found her first and we thought that she might know where the whelp was … but she managed to evade us.”

“Yeah and we missed out on some great upholstery,” muttered BaaAch sourly.

Sighing, shaking his head, Vendel murmured, “Oh, how dreadful for your diet. Next thing you know, both of you will be in the human prints. As for your eye’s Draal, it doesn’t seem to be anything damaging. A few good rinses and your eyes should be fine. Then, when you two are done with that, you can report your botched mission to the Trollhunter.”

“My father?” questioned Draal as he was handed a small cauldron of water to hold while a confused BaaAch was handed a ladle. “How is he?”

“He’s resting,” said Vendel as he forced Draal’s head back again and motioned for BaaAch to started rinsing with the ladle. “Well, as close as your father gets to resting. Mostly, he’s on bed arrest whining about how he doesn’t need respite. You know how he is. I had to have Aaarrrgghh guard his quarters just to keep him there. He’ll get worn down eventually.”

Hissing as BaaAch started his job, Draal gripped the slab he was sitting on. “Isn’t there something more effective than water? This doesn't seem to be helping much.”

Vendel barked a laugh and asked, “Milk probably, but do either of you want to milk a banshee for it because I’m not doing it.”

“No,” both younger trolls said in unison.

“I thought so. Now tell me of the female. If she wasn’t the whelp, did she seem to be close to whelp age or was she older? Like in child-rearing years?”

BaaAch shrugged as he poured more water. “She wasn’t small enough to be a whelp and she was driving one of those motor vehicles. So, I’m guessing she was old enough to rear whelps. She didn’t have any with her though, so what does it matter? She escaped.”

Humming, Vendel suddenly smacked BaaAch in the back of the calf again causing him to yelp and drop his ladle, “Of course it matters. Any information, regardless of how small it is, is useful. If she is in later rearing age, there is a high probability she is the mother of the whelp or at least is housing his changeling equivalent. And human mothers rarely allow their sucklings to wander too far from them … unless they are in older schooling ages. So, tomorrow, see if the same

female picks up a whelp from Arcadia High. That will likely be the boy Kanjigar is looking for. Until then, flush those eyes, report to the Trollhunter … and hopefully tomorrow you won't mess up."

Huffing, BaaAch blew the hair out of his eyes as Vendel wandered off to grab one thing or another, the red troll muttering, "I wouldn't count on it."

Despite himself, BaaAch managed to pull a chuckle out of the son of Kanjigar.

…

Strickler sighed as he stared at this phone again. Really, who taught Bular how to text? In all caps no less. Did he really think texting threats in such a manner made them more threatening? No, it just reminded him of the teenagers he was taking cellphones from all day in class. Still, he had yet to figure out who had given the brute the cell phone to begin with for that matter taught him how to use it. Was it on a contract or was it a burner cell? Actually, why did he care?! It was probably just Nomura messing with him.

Putting his phone down, Walt rubbed his temples and sighed. What was Bular's obsession with this whelp? It had barely been a day since the troll had encountered the interloper, but he already expected Walt to have some leads as to who the boy was.

If only to humor the Gumm Gumm, Strickler did have Otto search for any changelings in the area that fit the description of the skillet-wielding idiot, but as he suspected, no one fit the profile. Not surprising. It had been a long time since the changelings had added to their ranks. There were no changelings in child form as far as he knew. Mostly because Fetches were hard to come by and you basically had to wait 18 years until that changeling agent had full use of their freedom.

He knew Nomura was digging around for a Fetch recently, but besides that he considered the changeling-traitor theory to be a dead end.

A gutsy teenager was far more likely.

Human teenagers were just exposed to so much violence these days with a new massacre-themed movie hitting theatres every few months. They lacked survival skills and were the equivalent of adrenalin junkies nowadays … but that still didn't explain the blanket the hooded whelp had. The whole incident, retold while Bular was

basically screaming in his face, just seemed off. Like a huge detail was missing. When Walt inquired, all Bular added was: “It was my fate to kill Kaljigar and the whelp stole it from me. So, I will have his head instead.”

That didn’t help explain anything, but it did prove that Bular didn’t know how to use English tenses properly. He talked like he had missed his chance. Walt would have inquired further but he had had enough death threats to last him for days.

So, instead, he found himself digging up an old solution. It hadn’t been used it in years. Not since the original owner burned in the American witch trials.

Pulling a crystal out of a painted pouch, Walt dangled it before his eyes while faintly recalling the ashes he had pulled it from. He hoped this worked. It generally performed better with a lock of hair or a drop of blood instead of say a frying pan, but the spell only required an item owned by the individual you were searching for. It likely wouldn’t work, but if it even pointed in the general direction of a flesh bag. Hopefully, Bular would be happy with that late-night snack and forget the entire incident.

Strickler, personally, had better things to do with his time … like keeping up appearances and grading these papers.

Quickly texting Bular, he simply said that he would need the pan to scry for the boy. He probably should have noted that the scrying would be done in a few hours at the museum. It seemed he underestimated Bular’s persistence when it came to the whelp.

Exiting his office, part of him noted an echo of voices all the way down the hall. Likely, the play tryouts that had drug themselves into the early evening. Not that it mattered until a painfully familiar voice sounded over his shoulder.

“I brought the pan. Let’s find the whelp. *Now*. I thirst for his blood.”

Turning around on a heel, Bular looming in the dark empty halls like a set of floating red eyes from hell, Strickler quickly hissed, “Are you mad?! In the school like this?! The sun has barely started to set and I can still hear the drama kids down the hall. What if one of them saw you?”

Cracking his neck, Bular shrugged, “I would have had an early snack. Young meat is the softest.”

The changeling rolled his eyes, “Its one thing to eat a few vagrants around town, but people will notice when a child goes missing … even if they are from the drama club. Mind you, it might take a few days longer than if it was a member of the football team, but it would be noticed. We don’t need a milk carton epidemic. Now, get in my office.”

Bular’s lip twitched and his massive fingers became a fist as he resisted the urge to strangle the creature before him. Instead, with a growl that echoed down the halls, he followed the teacher into his office, allowing his massive form to catch and damage the door frame as he squeezed inside. He took some enjoyment from the action as Strickler’s eyes flickered yellow in irritation.

“You know I was going to lock the door. A feat which is now impossible because you ruined the doorframe,” grumbled the changeling as he shut the door as well as he could and grabbed a map of Arcadia off of the wall.

Placing the map on his desk, he took the pan from Bular and twirled the scrying crystal over it. He wasn’t a sorcerer by any means, but the witch who had had the crystal carried it to her fiery death. Where she got it, he could only speculate, but to carry it into death at least promised that there was some residual magic to the item. Nothing gave an item magic like the flavor of sacrifice.

“Return what is lost,

Return what was taken.

Find a heart that has beaten.

Or a heart that has been forsaken.

Take this item, take my time,

Crystal of thyn eye, return what’s mine.”

The item sparkled for a brief moment as if accepting the enchantment and then it started to spin around and around the map. It was spinning so fast Strickler wondered if it was going to go flying when suddenly the pointed crystal staled, falling onto the map.

Both Strickler and Bular leaned in.

“Isn’t that where we are?” finally asked Bular, having to hunch forward.

“Yes, yes, I do believe it is,” said Strickler.

Suddenly a honking noise nearby made both figures jump, the sound of excited children’s voices suddenly echoing down the halls.

Bular was the first to say what Strickler now suspected, “Drama kids.”

Seeing where this was going, Bular’s eyes flashing, Strickler suddenly stepped in front of the doorway, “I will go and see what students are here. Take the sewers … the sun has barely set.”

Not waiting for a reply, the changeling grabbed his things and headed outside, his footsteps echoing down the hall as he wondered which of his students would soon have no future.

…

“Destiny is a gift. Some go their entire lives living existences of quiet desperation. Never learning the truth, that what feels as though a burden pushing down upon our shoulders is actually the sense of purpose that lifts us to greater heights,” finished Jim in an almost wavering voice. He knew everyone probably thought the catch in his voice was acting, but he chose these lines because he knew they were powerful … and painful. He hoped that he didn’t shame Blinky by using them, but he still wanted Claire in this life. He dared not risk this moment.

Nonetheless, he still found the words to be true. They just weren’t about him being the Trollhunter. He was merely an arrow to point others in the right direction. It wasn’t a flashy existence, but he didn’t regret it either.

He hoped Kanjigar bore his warnings well.

“Bravo! Bravo!” finally came a cheer from the drama teacher and he knew Romeo was his. For the first time in what felt like in days, Jim truly smiled as Claire and he shared a glance. There was nothing wrong with a quiet existence when you have good company … except when your mom is watching!

Barbara had apparently snuck in and was now in the back row,

clapping up a storm as if this was a Christmas musical from middle school.

For a moment, Jim felt a blush creepy on his cheeks as his mother waved at him. Claire at least thought it was cute and giggled as she gave him a knowing wink. Toby, in turn, merely gave him a cheese dusted thumbs up as he dropped said bag of Cheetos all over the floor. This time around Jim had been able to convince Toby to try out with him and apparently 'he would do' for Friar Laurence.

Sharing one more awkward smile with Claire as she left, Jim walked to the back of the room where his mom was waiting, "Mom, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know, after observation I had to pick up the rental car and work wanted me to take a few days off. So, I figured, I would come pick you up when I found out you were trying out for the school play," said Barbara as she and the two boys headed outside like the rest of the drama-squad, their voices echoing down the hall. "I didn't even know you liked acting."

"Well, you know, new experiences," said Jim as he rubbed the back of his neck.

"Like girls?" said Barbara with a knowing smile.

"What? No. No," choked Jim, wanting to ignore any embarrassing conversation on school grounds. "Anyway, I'm glad you are okay. I was so worried last night that I cleaned the entire house from top to bottom. I … hope you weren't too attached to your perfumes. I accidentally dropped them all," said Jim as he tried to think of a reason as to why the house smelled like lemon.

Smiling sadly, Barbara nodded, "I noticed the lemony fresh smell … I had to open a few windows or risk being fumigated out of my own house."

Beside himself, Jim laughed, comforted by his mother's presence.

"And how's your head, Ms. L?" added Tobes as he looked at the butterfly bandages on her head. "I heard they were looking for a moose."

Jim frowned at the reminder, wondering who the moose-troll was. If she had said alligator, he would have known it was Bular, but as they drew closer to the rental car … Jim noticed he had bigger problems

right now. Strickler was standing just outside the school, watching all the children leave with a critical gaze. He had been ignoring Strickler to the best of his abilities all day even though the man had made an inquiry or two about his health yesterday.

Somehow, by the grace of God, he had even managed to get out of the 'talking to your mom' conversation that introduced his mom to Waltolomew Strickler, but it seemed some meetings were destined to be.The changeling's gaze now fell on his mother and him with a quirk of surprise. The man then proceeded to walk over to them, cementing the meeting Jim had looked forward to keeping under wraps. Though, to this day, Jim still wasn't really sure if Strickler had any real feelings for his mom … but given how he had endangered her, Jim honestly didn't care.

"Ah, young Atlas. Here you are. I had wanted to speak with you today, but I didn't expect to run into you now. I wasn't aware that you held any interest in the drama club," said Strickler, as poised as ever. "And who is this beautiful woman next to you? It seems she tries to steal the fiery beauty of Athena herself."

Barbara, despite herself, blushed slightly and smiled shyly as she pushed her red hair behind her ear like a school girl. "B-Barbara. My name is Barbara Lake. I'm Jim's mother. And who are you?"

Smiling effortlessly, Walter rubbed the scrying crystal's ties between his fingers as he looked to Jim and his mother. He had just been humoring Bular this whole time about the interloper, but now, looking at Jim and recalling his absence yesterday, part of him wondered if maybe it was one of the drama students. He sorely hoped not. He had always liked young Atlas.

Nonetheless, the teacher replied, "Walt Strickler. I'm Jim's history teacher. I honestly have been meaning to set up a meeting with you to speak about Jim."

Beside herself, Barbara crossed her arms over her chest and fell into momma bird mode. "Oh, is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, just some minor concerns," said Strickler, still rubbing the string between his fingers as he met Jim's gaze. He immediately noticed that Jim actually looked angry. A strange expression for young Atlas. In fact, during class, Jim had been strangely distant. He wouldn't meet his gaze and was short with his answers when asked anything. It was like Jim didn't even want to look at him … except for

right now. Jim had spotted the scrying tool and couldn't look away.

"What's that?" said Jim, eyeing the tool like it was a knife.

Raising a brow, the scrying tool seeming to refuse to point without its map or because he had already found what he requested, Strickler murmured, "Just … an old relic. It's meant to point me in the right direction when I feel I have none."

Jim's eyes were still hard but Strickler continued, "But, don't look so serious, Jim. The meeting is mostly a formality. I'm sure your mother wouldn't mind having someone to share dinner with tomorrow, now would she?"

Again, Barbara smiled, charmed like the last tim. She agreed before Jim could put his foot down. He wanted to punch Strickler in the gut or preferably the face, but he also wanted to keep attention off of himself. Strickler would get bored of his mother soon enough. He had nothing to gain this time around. Nothing at all … not that that information gave Jim much confidence as he stared at the scrying crystal. At least he thought it was one. Claire had mentioned bringing one into the dark lands to help find Enrique before he ran in by himself. Blinky had agreed … if they could find a real one. Scrying crystals, real ones, were apparently made from the crystalized husks of willow-o-wisps or the spirits of lost children. And wisp rarely became a husk unless their bodies were found by their loved ones. Thus, the reason scrying crystals were used for finding things.

Beside himself, part of him wondering if that scrying crystal was meant for him or his mother given Strickler had stopped to talk to them, Jim's fingers twitched with the want to rip it out of the man's hands.

Knowing that was too obvious, that he had to be cool about this, Jim did the next best thing: he tripped forward, slamming right into the changeling while he made a grab for crystal. In shock though, the taller man actually dropped said crystal while he grabbed Jim by his shoulders to steady him. "Woah, easy young Atlas. Are you alright? You seemed to have swayed there. I heard you were sick yesterday … should you even be back yet?"

Resisting the urge to slap away those offending hands, Jim pretended to shake his head, "No, no, I'm fine. You know teenager clumsiness."

"Are you sure Jim? I never asked why you were absent yesterday, but I presumed you were sick. How are you feeling?" said Barbara

suddenly turning on doctor-mode, pulling Jim slightly away from the changeling.

“Oh, it was nothing,” said Jim as he pretended to not search the ground desperately with his eyes. He didn’t get far though when he noticed that Strickler was now leaning down to pick up the dropped item. The teenager immediately jumped into action as he tripped forward. “Oh, let me get that for you, Mr. Strickler.”

He then proceeded to *accidentally* kick the scrying crystal into the nearby rain gutter.

“Oh, so sorry about that … I hope it wasn’t important.”

Frowning, his eyes pinched, the changeling murmured, “No, no. It wasn’t like it came from the 1600s or anything.”

Apologizing again, trying not to smirk at the small victory, Jim immediately felt his stomach drop when he noticed a set of claws reach out of the same rain gutter, pulling the scrying crystal within. He would know those claws anywhere ... and it seemed he now had something a little higher on his to-do list then finding a Fetch.

Chapter End Notes

> The trolls sometimes seem a little too smart for their own good … then again, Blinky and Aaarrrgghh did manage to track Jim down that first day, so I’m going to presume all trolls are good at stalking people. XD
>
> As for Barbara and Strickler, what can I say … I love me some old people love. And Barbara must use bear mace, just saying. XD

Battle of Wills

Chapter Notes

The image is of BaaAch and it's on Deviantart

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aaarrrgghh sat in the corner … just staring at his charge, Merlin's amulet beside him and out of its current owner's reach. The green troll dared not to even blink or relax. He especially knew better than to look away from the sleeping figure for more than a minute. Yes, the Trollhunter may look like he was merely resting in his bed furs as a collection of salve and bandages, but the ex-general knew better.

Kanjigar's breathing had changed a few minutes ago and his form now seemed stiff … likely because he was in pain. Not that Kanjigar was going to willingly take his tonics after last night.

Rising up onto his arms, the green troll slowly made his way to the blue troll's bedside. He looked at the collection of polyjuices and potions on the small nightstand next to the bed as if making a mental list. He then rumbled for a moment before stating, "Know you are awake. Just as well take medicine before eating."

The troll in the bed was still for about a second before Kanjigar sighed and slowly rolled over, looking irritated as he growled, “I will not be taking any more of Vendel’s elixirs. He had me sleep an entire day away with those. I am the Trollhunter. I shouldn’t be here, a prisoner in my own dwelling. I’m missing reports and critical information. I need to be back on my feet.”

Aaarrrgghh rumbled knowingly. Once again, this was probably about missing Draal’s report … even if Kanjigar never said that outright. The night before, Kanjigar having been treated and placed in his dwelling to rest, he had passed out and stayed out like a burnt-out bulb. Vendel had not been in the mood to deal with an escaping Trollhunter like usual and had given the injured troll a little *something* extra. Kanjigar hadn’t even stirred when Draal and BaaAch came to the door to report what they had and had not found.

In fact, Draal seemed somewhat relieved by his father’s nearly comatose state.

Apparently, they had not found the prophet but they had found what they presumed to be his mother. She then proceeded to escape by giving Draal temporary blindness, taking her delicious upholstery with her.

Honestly, it had looked like the young troll had taken a hammer to the face, his eyes red and watering. BaaAch had insisted it was more like a mace to the face though. What the difference was, Aaarrrgghh didn’t see a point. Either way, it was a good thing Kanjigar hadn’t seen it … but he did hear about it when he woke later.

Blinky sometimes lacked a mouth filter.

“You need rest and medicine. Your body is hurt. It knows it. Sun-stains, not funny,” said Aaarrrgghh as he picked up a tin full of small balls of mixed crystal and herbs. This one was for pain and even though Kanjigar was keeping a straight face, Aaarrrgghh knew how debilitating sun-stains could be. It had been a very long time – while he was under Gunmar’s control – but he remembered the *ache*.

“I help you sit up,” said Aaarrrgghh knowingly as he came closer and wrapped a large arm around his friend.

Despite himself, Kanjigar didn’t fight Aaarrrgghh nor could he hide the hiss of pain that escaped him. A moment later, it was with a mournful sigh that Kanjigar opened his palm to accept the first round of herbs. Death by sun-stains was a slow and painful way to go … and

it seemed Vendel wasn't leaving anything up to chance.

Staring at the little semi-glowing orbs bitterly. Kanjigar asked, "May I have some water for these?"

Aaarrrgghh gave him a look before muttering, "You going to try and escape?"

Kanjigar frowned and probably was going to go off on some tangent about Trollhunter responsibilities when there was a knock on the door. Both large trolls turned their attention to the heavy door. Both seemed to be waiting to see what the other was going to do about it. Aaarrrgghh … decided not to risk it. Obviously, Kanjigar couldn't be trusted with the way he was eyeing the stone window a room over. So, instead of answering the door, Aaarrrgghh called out, "It open!"

Kanjigar … tried his best to keep from looking dejected. He failed miserably, of course.

Unsurprisingly, Blinky came into the dwelling, his arms all overburden with books, research, more wrappings, and it looked like dinner. Diced cat or squirrel, gooey glow mushrooms, and bent silverware to be exact. Classic comfort food.

"Good evening, everyone. I'm glad to see you are up, Master Kanjigar. I have brought you dinner. I have also brought some more documents of past prophets, maps of Arcadia and battle sonnets in case anyone gets bored," said Blinky as he wandered around the room, making himself at home as he placed books and maps where he thought they belonged.

Kanjigar sighed, knowing that was Blinky's way of saying the sonnets were for him. "I do not wish to read battle sonnets, Blinkous. I haven't the time. I need to be out there, finding the bridge and Bular."

"Ah," said Blinky as if considering Kanjigar's words before he tilted his head to Aaarrrgghhh, "And how many times has he tried to sneak out this evening?"

"Two," chuckled Aaarrrgghh. "About to try three. Going to get water for medicines. You watch"

Ignoring Kanigar's insulted expression, for a Trollhunter merely *departs* and does not *escape*, Blinky merely nodded, "Of course, of course. Vendel said more water than usual was needed because of his blood loss. Grab some bowls as well, please."

The green troll merely grunted and set off to another room.

Frowning, Kanjigar murmured, “A Trollhunter does not have to escape-“

“Yes, yes, he merely departs,” quoted Blinky, knowing one of Kanjigar’s favorite cop-outs. “That will not be working this time, Master Kanjigar. Vendel is adamant that you rest this time, especially if Killahead Bridge is in our near future. You will need all your strength.”

“And yet my son was sent out *again* today even though the sun has barely set. Not to mention that Bular is still out there,” said Kanjigar, trying to keep an even tone even though he was obviously angry with the development. He had drawn away from Draal for a reason ... to keep him safe. Now, his son was in the thick of things.

“He is a capable fighter and also less noticeable than yourself. It is probably for the best that someone relatively unknown looks for the prophet instead of yourself. Draal is less likely to draw attention to himself as well as the hooded-boy. It is for the best,” said Blinky as he dragged an antler and fur bound chair to Kanjigar’s beside as well as a pile of books.

Kanjigar tried not to frown at this for it meant one of two things: historical documents or Blinky’s dissertation. He knew both were a ruse to put him to sleep. More than once, as much as it pained him to admit it, he had fallen asleep to the historian’s inane ramblings in the library. It was just Blinky’s tone of voice. It also was now a weapon against him at this point. And it seemed that they were all conspiring to keep him in bed this time even though, more than ever, he needed to be out there.

Blinky, catching Kanjigar’s worried glance at two training swords mounted on the wall, quickly added, “Do not worry so much, old friend. Draal will be fine. He has grown into a fine warrior and is proud to be in service to the Trollhunter. Besides, one of the warnings told you to depend on your companions and that is what you are doing now.”

“Yes, your friends,” added Aaarrrgghh as he came back into the room, armed with a collection of stone dishes that he handed to Blinky. The green troll than personally poured some rusty water into a smaller drinking bowl and put it on the blue troll’s bedside. “For medicine … after meal.”

Kanjigar didn't think he could frown any harder. It seemed they all were dead set on keeping him bed-bound and asleep be it through herbs or Blinky's readings. Well, at least he had until after his meal to find a way out. Blinky, offering him a mixed bowl of cat, mushrooms, and rusty human utensils, seemed set on knocking him out as quickly as possible though.

"Yes, eat up and rejuvenate. Then you can pick what is read to you, Master Kanjigar," said Blinky smiling.

Kanjigar personally felt it was a smug smile. Regardless, he brought the meal to his lips. He did need his strength after all. He already had a plan as well.

"And I expect you to eat that silverware, Master Kanjigar, and not use it in another escape attempted," added Blinky, watching him with three eyes as he poured a bowl of food for Aaarrrgghh and himself.

Aaarrrgghh merely chuckled at his expense.

Sighing, throwing the silverware back into his bowl to be eaten, the larger blue troll grumbled, "And what if Draal runs into Bular tonight? I need to be somewhere besides in this bed, Blinky."

Huffing as he took a seat, already eyeing which books he would be reading aloud tonight, the multi-eyed troll added, "Oh please, the chances of Draal running into Bular are astronomically slim, especially if the bridge is being rebuilt. Bular would focus his energy on rebuilding that … not finding a random troll out and about to fight."

Sighing into his food, mournfully watching Aaarrrgghh ready his medication, Kanjigar surrendered … for now. After all, Draal knew better than to pick a fight with Bular. At least he hoped his son knew better.

…

Draal could not believe that the old goat was right. The female from last night had gone to Arcadia High and now she had two young male-whelps walking out with her. He could tell by the way BaaAch was sniffing the air that he was getting the scents.

"Is it one of the young males next to her?" asked Draal, a little more excited than he wanted to admit as they watched from a storm drain across the street. He had failed his father last night and thank the light of Deya that his father had been resting so he had time to try again.

He only had to admit his embarrassing failure to Aaarrrgghh. Aaarrrgghh had been the one watching and keeping his father homebound at the time. As usual, the green troll had silently accepted most of what Draal had to say with a thoughtful grunt. He didn't once laugh at Draal's unfortunate happenstance. He merely agreed with Vendel's suggestion to check out the human school.

Taking a deep invent of air before exhaling and ruffling the hair around his eyes, BaaAch hummed, "Well, it *might* be the skinny legged one. It's hard to tell from over here. There are other scents about. He might just be a relative … or super clean. You know humans and their soaps. Its blasphemous that they use it for washing instead of eating."

"Perhaps … or he is just trying to hide his scent like the changeling he is. Either way, let's get closer to make sure. Then, we can follow them," added Draal as he watched an older male come and speak with the small group. "Come. There is a closer gutter next to the group. Almost within grabbing distance."

BaaAch hummed in agreement and quickly the two trolls made their way underneath the road and through an adjoining tunnel. Draal immediately stalled though when he saw a dark form standing in the gutter-light a few yards down, a small glowing blue crystal in hand. The blue troll didn't even get to dwell on if he wanted to fight or retreat to follow his quarry when BaaAch came around the corner and slammed right into him.

"Draal, be careful. I almost got the quilt wet. I still need that to scent … the … *oh*," finished BaaAch when he noticed why Draal had stalled, a pair of red eyes now glaring at them both. "Not good."

"Not good indeed," agreed Bular as he eyed the two trolls, his deep voice echoing down the tunnel. "It seems the Trollhunter has lost two of his flock … or is he not far behind? I do have a fight to finish with him."

"What are you doing here Bular?" asked Draal defiantly, a sinking feeling forming as he watched Bular tie the small blue glowing crystal around his wrist. He wasn't sure what the little pointed crystal was for, but he now had a sinking feeling that Bular was looking for the same thing they were. It was made even more certain when those red eyes focused in on the troll beside him.

Bular seemed to ignore Draal altogether as he slowly started to stalk forward, his steps echoing with the sound of moving water. "And,

little sheep, where did you get that piece of cloth around your neck?"

Wishing he had brought a sword instead of rope and some bags, Draal stepped in front of his friend like the protector he had trained to be. He wanted to fight, but his first responsibility was to the citizens of Troll Market. So if that meant running … that is what they would do. BaaAch could hold his own in a spar, but he didn't have the challenging temperament that Draal did.

Yet, surprising everyone, BaaAch did comment as he pulled the quilt tighter around his neck, "I … am not a *sheep*. I am an artist. And, as an artist, I feel I must tell you now that this human-blanket will clash with your skin tones. You don't want this. It would look terrible on you."

As if surprised by the mere audacity of the red troll, Bular growled in irritation and took a rather angry step forward, "It was not a request. Give it to me! I will have that interloping whelp and if you stand in my way, I will kill both of you as well."

Swallowing, BaaAch tried not to cower as he muttered, "Everyone's a critic."

Bular actually laughed at that as he pulled his swords from his scabbards, the swords' tips disappearing into the dark water at his feet. "Cheeky. Well, I do suppose it is more fun to take the cloth from you … and if I can't kill the father, the son will have to do."

Draal immediately took on a defensive stance when Bular roared, the Gumm Gumm rushing forward like a great rhino while his blades scrapped either side of the small tunnel causing sparks to light up the scene. The blue troll only had enough time to push BaaAch back around the corner before he had to dodge, two blades slamming into the cement of the tunnel, cracking it.

Cursing himself for bringing nothing but bags and rope like the two trainers had recommended, Draal brought up a fist of his own into an upper cut. His hit was true and powerful, knocking back the Gumm-Gumm with a grunt while simultaneously being the first to draw blood.

Draal personally took this moment to look his old friend in the eye and say, "Run, he mustn't get the blanket."

He didn't wait for a reply though, be it agreement or defiance, when he rushed forward and tried to tackle the slightly larger troll into one

of the walls.

Bular didn't allow this though, having regained some of his clarity from the nasty right hook. He, instead, grabbed Draal's horns and tried to twist like he was going to bring down a great bull. It was mostly effective, the dark troll using Draal's own momentum against him to slam the blue troll's shoulder into the tunnel's wall.

In reaction, Draal tried to let go of his opponent's waist and drop down to pick up one of the swords Bular had lost, but Bular grabbed the side the blue troll's head and slammed it as hard as he could against the cement wall. He then did this same action repeatedly, over and over again like he was trying to break open a can of corn. Draal was unable to slip free despite the hard punches he kept landing in Bular's sides. The Gumm Gumm just kept going until Draal's punches started to falter and his stance started to waiver. Soon … the son of Kanjigar was barely standing, blood pooling down the side of his head and nose.

Laughing, Bular stopped pounding a hole into the cement with his opponent's skull and grabbed Draal's face with both hands. It was like he wanted to get a good look at him. Draal tried to use this moment to blink back his sight. He never got to collect himself though when suddenly the Gumm Gumm head butted him, letting Draal fall into the shallow water like a sack of potatoes.

Smiling like this was a friendly little spar, Bular wiped some blood for his lip and reached down to retrieve his two blades, his voice amused, "Well, that was a bit disappointing. I think I might be doing your father a favor in killing you now. You would make a terrible Trollhunter. You probably wouldn't even last a week before you were felled. Now, it's time to free your head from your shoulders, Draal son of Kanjigar. When your father is dead, I might even place your screaming heads next to each other."

Draal, struggling to sit up and will his double vision away, barely even saw the blades coming down in a wide arch when suddenly something white went flying into the scene. Even with his double vision, the blue troll could see it was a small refrigerator. It hit true … right in Bular's face. The Gumm Gumm went down into the water with a resounding splash, roaring in rage as he tried to quickly pull the appliance from his horns.

"Why is it always the face?!"

BaaAch was then next to him, pulling Draal to his feet as he ground out, “Draal, get up! You idiot! Did you really think I would leave you?! Now, get your legs under you. You are more use to Troll Market alive … and your father would kill me if I brought you back dead. Now move your spiky ass!”

All but dragged to his feet, Draal stumbled down the sewers with BaaAch holding him up. Even though he knew that they were both running for their lives, that it was true that he was worth more alive than dead to his father, he couldn’t banish Bular’s words: *You would make a terrible Trollhunter. You probably wouldn’t even last a week before you were felled.*

Closing his eyes, completely relying on BaaAch to lead him, Draal felt his hearts sink because he knew it was true.

Chapter End Notes

> I am a notorious character mauler. Yep, just mauling them to pieces because I can. Also, according to WikiSorcerer, this story now has a Tvtropes page!
>
> TvTropes
>
> Also … laziest fight scene ever. :I

Still Alive

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Move this arm. Higher. Higher. Higher-"

Finally getting frustrated with the aging troll at his side, for Kanjigar and forced healing were two things that never mixed well, he dropped his arms to glare at Vendel.

“Is there a point in this practice of torture, Vendel?" groused the Trollhunter. "Or have you come to see if my limbs have started to atrophy from disuse?”

“Pah,” said Vendel at his bedside as he sat back and lifted the magnifying tool from over his eye. “It has hardly been three days, Kanjigar. I rather doubt your limbs have started to waste away. As for your patience, that is another matter entirely. These types of wounds take time. As for a point to this, I’m seeing if your skin is knitting back together properly or if I need to add another layer of hot metal.”

Kanjigar frowned slightly but said nothing more as Vendel put the magnifying tool back over his eye and leaned back in, his dull claws picking and prodding at the healing patchwork of cracked stone-skin and soft metal. The blue troll's upper torso honestly looked like a dried lake bed. It would leave an interesting scar when it was finally healed.

“Is it healing well at least?” finally asked Kanjigar as Vendel sat back down, reached for wrappings that were soaking in some kind of orange glowing herb water. Kanjigar’s nose wrinkled at the smell. Not because it was unpleasant, glowing herbs like it grew all around troll caves, but the herbs reminded him more of pain than of relief.

“It would heal faster if you stopped trying to escape,” commented the old troll as he pulled the herb-infused cloth from its bowl and started rewrapping Kanjigar’s sun-stained wounds.

Huffing, Kanjigar grumbled, “A Trollhunter merely *departs* and does not *escape*.”

Giving their Trollhunter an unamused look, Vendel huffed, “Regardless, you are to remain in this bed for at least another three

days."

"What?!" barker Kanjigar, trying not to hiss as he jostled his shoulders. "I need to find the bridge."

"Well, if you stopped trying to *depart* so often, Blinky and Aaarrrgghh could be put to better use … as incompetent as they can be. Also, if we find the prophet, a complete warning would likely tell us where it is to begin with, instead of us running around like headless fools," added Vendel as he stalled in his wrapping to reach for a bowl of fresh rusty water at Kanjigar's bedside. He then selected a few herbs from tiny bowls and vials sprinkling them into the water. He added a few more liquids to the mixture, ignoring the sour look on the patient's face as the rusty water became a glowing hodgepodge of horror.

"I'm not drinking that," said Kanjigar as he leaned away like a whelp that didn't want to take a polyjuice when sick. "I am tired of this constant unconsciousness."

"Sleep will heal you quickly since it will keep you still and from cracking your skin. Plus, I'm tired of hearing you whine. *Drink. It,*" demanded Vendel, taking on a no-nonsense tone.

Snorting air out of his nose, Kanjigar regrettably took the bowl and was about to figure a way of dumping it into a nearby potted mushroom when he asked, "And what if the prophet doesn't want to help us?"

Vendel gave him a look and groused, "He wouldn't have saved your sorry behind then. Now stop stalling and *drink it.* I have other things to do tonight."

Looking at the mixture again like it was going to suddenly rise up and eat his face, everyone suddenly stalled when there was a slamming knock on the door. Vendel immediately turned to look at the door which gave the Trollhunter ample time to poison the potted mushroom beside him. Even Aaarrrgghh and Blinky popped out of the adjoining room. Everyone in Troll Market knew where the Trollhunter lived, which wasn't odd, but his injury was known as well. No one but the most desperate would try to call on the Trollhunter at this time.

"I'll get it," said Blinky quickly before Kanjigar used this as an excuse to get up and escape Vendel's care. Really, it was amazing the steps the blue troll went to in order to ignore medical treatment.

Opening the heavy wooden door, Blinky immediately gasped and

stepped out, the conversation floating into the dwelling. “Deya’s light, what happened to him?!”

“We went to the school as Vendel suggested and … Bular was there. Is Vendel here? We went to the healing dwell first and it was empty,” said a panicked voice. “He keeps fading in and out, and I don’t know how much longer I can carry him.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Not surprising. It looks like a head wound. Quickly, we will put him in his old room,” said Blinky as he stepped forward to try and help a bloodied Draal into the dwelling.

“No, ppp-please,” came a somewhat choked reply from the younger troll. “I don’t want my father to see.”

“Young Master Draal,” came the respectful title Blinky hadn’t used in decades since Draal had moved out of his father’s dwelling, “There is no shame in surviving a powerful opponent. Come now, Vendel is here and that wound needs to be tended.”

Vendel, seeing where this was going as Kanjigar threw his bed furs off of his legs, stood up first and immediately smacked the larger troll in the head lightly. The Trollhunter looked abash that the healer had had the audacity to do that to him, but the older troll quickly responded, “Stay in bed, Kanjigar. It will help no one to be in my way … and Blinky will be of better use helping me than watching you. I trust we can leave you unsupervised as we tend to your son.”

Kanjigar wanted to argue, he did, but as he watched his son trip into the house with half of his face bloodied, his jaw snapped shut. He immediately felt angry that he had allowed this to happen to his son at all, that he had allowed Bular to best him to begin with, but as Draal lifted his head to glance at him warily, he found a new feeling crowding in his chest.

“I am sorry father … I have dishonored you and your title with … my defeat. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me.”

Draal then looked away, as if ashamed to be in the same room with his father, the Trollhunter. He didn't even glance back as he allowed himself to be ushered away without another word.

Kanjigar couldn’t move as the truth of the situation started to sink in. This really was his fault … wasn’t it? He had done this to his son by pushing him away. How could Draal ever think himself dishonorable or unworthy? He walked away from that fight alive.

Swallowing, suddenly feeling helpless, Kanjigar buried his head in his hands and tried not to shudder every time he heard a whimper or dry cry carry from upstairs where Draal's old room had remained basically untouched. He was a terrible father. If anyone should be ashamed … it was him.

…

Strickler listened to his footsteps echo on the waxed floor of the museum. It was a haunting symphony because he was just waiting for the sound of scampering to echo behind him or the heavy yet quick thuds of stone feet. He was not surprised when he stalled in front of the bridge … and Bular's voice rumbled behind him.

Shifting his gaze, seeing the troll's red eyes barely over his shoulder, Strickler continued to face the nearly finished bridge as he spoke, "Did you find my scrying crystal?"

"And a few other things," grumbled Bular as he presented his hand over the changeling's shoulder, the blue crystal dangling before the man like a hook. "I almost killed both son and father in under a week. Both … were spared due to intervention. Though I did enjoy watching Kanjigar's son bleed."

Strickler hummed and reached forward to take the blue glowing crystal, ready to try scrying again. He hoped that the spell had just malfunction. He wasn't a witch after all nor did he have the touch of one. What he had done was mostly in theory … and he wasn't going to get young Atlas killed over a failed spell. If someone had to die, it just as wells be for his benefit. There were a few humans he could have done away with far more than Atlas.

Though Atlas' behavior the last two days was … disconcerting.

Either way, he wasn't throwing young Atlas to the wolves quite yet. He was sure the lovely Barbara would probably spread some light on Jim's recent behavior anyway.

Finally wrapping his hand around the crystal, Walt was about to rip it free from Bular's grasp when the troll suddenly pulled it back, rumbling, "So … was it the boy you were speaking to? He looks about the right size."

"The boy?" asked Strickler, faking ignorance. "You mean Young Atlas and his mother? No, no. The crystal didn't react to them. I merely stopped to speak with them over business. I don't even think the spell

worked correctly."

Bular offered the crystal once more, letting it dangle there. Strickler didn't rise to the bait. He merely stood there with his hands now behind his back.

"Are you sure? Or are you merely fond of him? You aren't becoming soft, are you?" asked Bular, his rancid breath washing over the changeling's shoulder.

Frowning as he watched the crystal twirl once more, the changeling merely said, "My reasoning is the same as it has been all night. People notice when children go missing. If we just start grabbing children you think are interlopers, sooner or later you'll have eaten half the high school. Not that I would be terribly broken up with the lessened workload, but it would also attract unwanted attention."

Grunting in irritation, Bular released the scrying crystal like it was a burden, Walter grabbing it with his quick reflexes.

Tucking the small item away in his jacket pocket, feeling the almost ice-cold crystal on his flesh, Strickler watched Bular step up and stare at the partially completed bridge. The large troll seemed to admire it for a moment before he turned his head slightly and groused, "Did it work at all then? I want that interloper's head."

Stepping up to the bridge as well, staring at the intricate stonework, Strickler chose his words carefully, "Traditionally, materials such as cloth, hair or blood are used for a scrying. So, I can only presume something like a frypan was … insufficient."

Bular growled at his side before turning away.

Rotating slightly, worry for young Atlas strangely pulling at his mind, Strickler asked, "Where are you going?"

"I have a Wendo to see about a blanket," was all Bular said as he disappeared into the darkness.

…

Aaarrrgghh came down the stairs about an hour later with BaaAch at his side. He had had the younger troll tell him what had happened if only to spare Kanjigar the gritty details. The father didn't need the added stress when he was healing … and though it pained him to admit it, Aaarrrgghh had been a General for a reason. His vocabulary

might lack in eloquence, but his mind was still calculating enough to deal with things while Kanjigar rested. He didn't need his old friend blaming himself for this.

Yet, when he and the orange-red troll made it downstairs, Kanjigar was still staring at his hands as if he was lost. Even the amulet glowed weakly nearby as if it was uncertain.

Aaarrrgghh immediately sighed for he knew that the blue troll was blaming himself.

Nudging the young hairy troll that was blatantly staring, Aaarrrgghh muttered, "Go home. Rest. We talk tomorrow."

Then, not waiting for the younger troll to leave, Aaarrrgghh made his way across the dwelling. He sat at his old friend's side, ready to tell him Draal was fine and that this wasn't his fault. He didn't even get to open his mouth though as he listened to the downtrodden father murmur, "I can still smell his blood on the floor."

Eyes going wide as he turned around, he was almost glad that BaaAch hadn't left yet. The young troll nearly tripped over himself in reaction as he headed into the kitchen to get a bucket. "I-I'll deal with it."

Then, the young troll out of sight, Aaarrrgghh turned his attention back to Kanjigar, rumbling, "It not that bad. Just head wound. Bleeder and dizziness. Vendel said he would be fine."

Kanjigar still had yet to look at him as he stared at his hands like they were to blame for this. Aaarrrgghh did not interrupt the silence. Blinky and he had once discussed it … Kanjigar pushing his son away. Neither knew how to rectify the situation, but it seemed the answer had come in the form of a whelp in a hood. Now, the truth was crashing down around the aging father, and Aaarrrgghh didn't know if Kanjigar was prepared to deal with it.

Being the Trollhunter for so long had taught the blue troll how to deal with many types of situations … except for his own personal life, it seemed. It was like Kanjigar didn't know that he was still allowed to be *just Kanjigar* and not only the *Trollhunter*. Well, it seemed the father side of him was now dealing with that realization and it seemed to sting worse than any physical wound. Aaarrrgghh wished he had the perfect words to say in order to wash that lost expression off of his old friend's face, but he didn't even think Blinky would know what to say right now.

“It not your fault. Draal fought good given he had no armor or weapon. He also showed he has good friend. You should be proud,” said Aaarrrgghh carefully.

Finally releasing the pent-up air he had been holding, Kanjigar turned his tired gaze to the green troll, “Should I be? I … have ill-prepared my son. You should have seen the look he gave me. It was almost like he was ashamed to come home alive since he wasn't the victor. If anyone should be ashamed … it is I. I have failed him as a father.”

Frowning, caring little if BaaAch was watching as he started to clean up the troll-blood on the floor, Aaarrrgghh came forward and carefully placed a large hand on Kanjigar’s neck. He then brought the other troll’s head forward so that their foreheads met and their horns slightly touched. It was a show of comfort. Kanjigar wasn’t known for being overly expressive in this way, but neither was Aaarrrgghh at first. It had taken him decades just to allow himself to sleep in another’s presence for that matter allow himself to touched in any way.

Foreheads still pressed together, Aaarrrgghh murmured the one thing he knew Kanjigar needed to hear, “You still here. Draal still here too. Tell him you care. That is good father. Never too late if both are alive.”

Closing his eyes, leaning his forehead heavily against Aaarrrgghh’s, Kanjigar nodded his head weakly in agreement. He was alive … and he would take this time to let his son know that he was proud. He had always been proud.

Chapter End Notes

I feel this chapter was kind of short and fillery, but one of my points for writing this story was for Kanjigar to reconnect with his son. So, in a way, I am building up to that part of the tale.

Anyway, next chapter definitely has a Kanjigar and Draal bonding moment … and Jim and Tobes get their vigilante bro-dome on. It should be amazing. (~˘▾˘)~

Into the Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim stood there next to his locker, just glaring at the clock across the courtyard. It was almost noon … and his mom was probably already at the restaurant with Strickler. In fact, they were probably sitting down and smiling at each other right now like lovesick teenagers. His mom had likely giggled when Strickler commented her hair again and … the big hand finally clicked over onto the twelve and it was officially noon. His mom was officially on her first not-date with Strickler. It seemed that Aphrodite would not be denied in this timeline.

Sticking his head into his locker, Jim screamed.

Toby, standing next to him, nearly dropped his phone onto the cement below.

“Woah, Jimbo. I know you forgot to make lunch for us, but its only meatloaf day. It’s not like its fish sticks day,” said Toby as he patted Jim on the back, the taller teenager bent over in his locker as if he was hiding from all the students that were now staring at them.

Sighing, pulling his head out of his locker, Jim wiped a hand down his face. “It’s not the rubbery meatloaf, Tobes … It's just … I couldn’t change anything. Even though I basically begged my mom not to go meet with Strickler, she still went. Why did she go?! He’s *evil*.”

Toby gave Jim a look, sighing as he patted his friend on the arm, “Jim, Jim, Jim. I know Mr. S’s class can be a little … dry … once in a while, but I wouldn’t call him evil. And, quite honestly, after that *fiery beauty of avocados* pickup line followed by that eye make out moment those two had, there was no stopping them. You’re lucky that it was only Strickler and not say, Coach Lawrence.”

Looking even more horrified, Jim squawked, “What do you mean: eye makeout?! My mom wouldn’t do that in front of me.”

Shaking his head, still patting his friend’s arm, Toby continued, “I was there, Jimbo. I saw the eye makeout. And Mrs. L is kind of hot so I can’t blame Mr. S.”

“Tobes,” said Jim, horrified as he was slowly led to the cafeteria. “Don’t say that about my mom.”

Putting his hand up in defense, Toby continued, “I’m just saying, your mom is a hot lady and she’s single. Mrs. L was bound to jump back onto the dating caboose sooner or later. Like I said, at least it’s not Coach Lawrence. Can you imagine? It would be like gym class forever.”

Jim rolled his eyes at his friend’s horrified gaze as he grumbled, “She can’t date Coach Lawrence … because Steve’s mom already is.”

Toby actually dropped his phone this time, “Wwwwwwwhhaaaat?”

The taller teenager immediately cringed. Oops. Had that happened yet? Probably. Since the Coach was apparently living with Steve’s mom. That just doesn’t happen overnight.

“We are getting off track, Tobes. Seriously, what am I going to do? My mom can’t date him,” whined Jim, ignoring Toby’s obvious shock about Coach Lawrence and the school bully.

Finally picking up his phone, eyeing the screen for cracks, Tobias waved his hand, “I don’t get the upset, bro. I mean, didn’t you used to like Mr. S? It can’t be that bad.”

“It can Tobes! It *can*. What part of *he’s evil* don’t you understand?!” added Jim as he resisted the urge to grab his friend and shake him in the middle of the hall.

Personally, Jim wished he could just tell Toby everything that had happened in his last life, but he also felt the sting of that loss. It was like an open wound. He didn’t want Tobias feeling that loss as well. After all, every night when the sun set, he missed Blinky’s almost fatherly warmth and Aaarrrgghh reassuring presence. He also missed Draal’s odd friendship and even Vendel’s snarky one-liners. It ached. It was like he had lost a limb or something. Toby had so few friends as it was … how would he feel knowing that Jim stole his wing-man from him and the budding relationship with Darci?

It wouldn’t be fair to him. Some things … were better bore alone.

In the end, if he had to admit anything at all, he would just claim he had dreamed about trolls and changelings. But, for now, he would spare his friend those burdens. It wasn’t like he had the power to get truly involved in that world again anyway. Even though, said world,

might be after him.

Jim knew a troll or likely a changeling had hunted down his mom, and then there was the scrying crystal last night. By now, Strickler probably had it back. Now, not only was there a Fetch he somehow had to deal with, but he needed to get the scrying crystal. This was all his fault! Why had he taunted Bular at the bridge? That would be the only reason anyone would bother hunting him down and his mom had suffered for it. Unless it was all a coincidence which he doubted.

“Why? Why? Why is this happening?! " finally said Jim as he reached up and squeezed his head between his hands, his mind running circles around itself.

“Hey, hey, buddy. It’s okay,” said Toby as he stalled them both in the hall. “I get it. Step parents suck, no one wants one, but it’s just one date. Don’t get ahead of yourself. Your mom might hate him and his suave silver fox thing going on.”

Jim gave Toby a look.

“What? I calls it as I sees it,” defended his portly friend. “Anyway, if it does get serious, we’ll just work on your … angry teenager phase or something. We’ll get you nothing but black clothes, fake piercing and teach you how not to shower. Maybe throw some skulls around your room. I know that might be hard for you and your boy scout morals, but I’m sure we can create a rift if needed.”

Beside himself, Jim cracked a tired smile, asking, “Skulls huh? Are we going to start a rock band while we are at it?”

Waving his hand in the air, Toby said, “Sure, I’ll play the triangle and you can play the recorder. We’ll be the *Acting Out Lame-Boys* or *Gonna Die Alone Kids* band. In fact, I’m sure I can even get us a gig.”

…

Draal groaned and rolled over slightly, the aching of his head causing him to hiss as he pushed his face into his bed furs. This place smelled like him … but it also smelled of dust. He immediately opened his non-swollen eye to see where he was and instantly regretted it. He was in his old room from when he was a whelp … and his father was asleep in a chair next to his bed.

For a moment, he was confused as to why he was in his old room, having moved out a few decades ago to step up his training and prove

that he was a worthy heir. He also may have done so to escape whomever his father had assigned to be his handler while he was off in other corners of the world. All Draal wanted to do was combat training, but most of his handlers were noncombative and wanted to show him their specialties.

It … had hurt. It was like his father didn't think he could be a capable warrior or a worthy successor. After all, artisans instead of retired warriors were assigned to look after him. The only thing of value he got from any of them was YeOwh the Bard, father of BaaAch. BaaAch had practically been dragged along to be Draal's friend after all.

So, his horns still growing in, Draal was forced to look elsewhere. The only other troll in his life besides his increasingly busy father was the renowned General, Aaarrrgghh. The green troll had been Draal's first stop when he noticed his father hadn't the time to show him how to properly throw a spear.

Aaarrrgghh had frowned at his request for training and declined, saying something about learning to solve problems without violence and pacifism. Draal didn't understand what a pacifist was at the time and all he heard was *no*. He even went to Blinky after that, looking for someone to accept his quest for knowledge. Blinky had merely introduced him to great warriors in books and poems. It hardly did anything to soothe his injured pride.

So, partially to gain his father's attention, he had moved into his own dwelling. He was considered a young adult after all. And thus, he propelled himself forward on sheer determination. He had become self-made and hoped his actions would prove him worthy to stand by his father's side.

It had not.

His father, if anything, had at first seemed disappointed when he finally came back from the old caves of Europe. And so, Draal pushed himself harder and grew into what he though a proud warrior should be. A desperation had set in at this point … along with a slow forming bitterness. Not for his father. Never his father. His father was important. Protecting the Troll Realm came first, but … just a few moments of his time here and there. That's all he wanted. Just … a little praise.

He just wanted his father to look at him.

Feeling tears threaten to gather in his eyes, the young warrior buried

his face deeper into his bed furs to gather himself. He was not so weak that he needed to cry like a whelp. He would *not*. He was enough of a disgrace the way it was, already having lost to Bular.

And yet, when he heard the chair next to his bed groan as his father woke up, he couldn't keep the tears in. In fact, his pride was pushed over the edge when his father reached out and touched his arm, asking worriedly, "Draal, are you alright?"

And that was all it took. Draal the Destroyer was now a whelp again as he felt tears spring free. In shame, he buried his face deeper still into his bed furs. He was an *adult*. He didn't need to cry. His father did nothing wrong. His father was the Trollhunter and was needed elsewhere. He was the only one at fault here. He needed to pull himself together. He …

"Draal? My son. Is something wrong? Are you in pain?" continued his father's voice, a large paw being placed under his chin to encourage him to look up.

Beside himself, unable to deny the being he admired in every way, Draal allowed his father to tilt his face out of the furs. He allowed his idol to see the forming tears that dare fall from their inner sanctum as well as the swollen and scraped side of his face.

Kanjigar, unable to stop himself, looked at his son with a mixture of pity and horror, finally seeing the bruised and scraped side of Draal's face. In fact, one eye was nearly swollen shut and part of his head was wrapped in bandages.

Draal said the only thing he could think of before Kanjigar could even muster a sentence. "I'm sorry, father. I failed you … I am not worthy to be your heir."

Brow furrowing, the older troll cupped the unmarred side of Draal's face before his son could turn away. Then, taking a large thumb, he wiped away one of those rare tears. A silence was quickly allowed to hang in the air. Draal was close to sobbing when Kanjigar finally found the right words to say, for he would not allow one word to die in his throat or be unspoken. For, like the hooded boy had warned him, he didn't have forever.

Wiping another tear away, Kanjigar spoke in a soft voice, "My son … the only one that should feel ashamed here, is I. I am just happy that you came home alive. In fact, you are twice as skilled as I was at your age. I am proud of you … as well as very ashamed that I did not tell

you sooner. I … am sorry for not acknowledging you sooner. You are becoming a fine troll."

Swallowing thickly as numerous emotions battled in his gut, Draal choked, "But I am not a warrior, am I? You've known since I was a whelp. Aaarrrgghh and Blinky knew as well that I wasn't worthy of the title. That's why you never had time to train me and kept having artisans watch me. You all knew I wasn't built to be a warrior such as yourself."

Sighing, hating himself for allowing his son's self-doubt to grow into this, Kanjigar lifted his other arm and carefully cupped the other side of Draal's head so that his son would not look away. He wanted Draal to look at him, to see his atonement. "It is not that I didn't think you could be a warrior. I knew that you could … I just wanted you to have a choice. The amulet didn't give me much of one, so I wanted my son to be whatever he wanted. Be it a bard to a record keeper. Know that I am proud of you and whatever you become. If it's a warrior you wish to be, then I am happy. I will even find time to train you further if that is what you wish."

Sitting up, his head still being held in his father's grasp, he almost sobbed in relief, "T-thankyou, father. That is all I ever wanted."

Smiling softly, hating himself for taking so long to tell his son something so simple and how much he was beloved, Kanjigar added, "Come now, my son. No need for such sad tears anymore. Share a moment with your father."

Then, feeling like he hadn't embraced his son in a millennium, Kanjigar leaned forward and knocked horns with his son, their foreheads meeting in a show of affection and love. For a moment, that was all they did, their foreheads touching as Draal's breathing became calm and clear.

The moment felt like it could last forever, a single instant of perfect calm ... until Draal came to a realization. His father was supposed to be in bed.

Slowly, he pulled away, eyeing his father critically with a frown. Part of him was now wondering if he should crawl out of his bed and demand his father lie down. Draal might be half blind at the moment with an aching head, but he still felt his father's injuries were far more pressing than his.

So, he asked apprehensively, "Father … are you allowed to be out of

bed? I'm surprised Vendel let you leave your furs even with me injured. Did you sneak up here?"

Scoffing, Kanjigar groused, "Of course I can be out of bed … but only if I am at your side."

Draal raised a brow, wondering how much bargaining it took just for Vendel to allow that.

"Which is why," added Kanjigar, smirking slightly as he peaked at the doorway and then at the window in Draal's room, "we should leave before they check on us. As long as I am at your side, I am not disobeying Vendel now am I?"

Almost gapping at his father's underhanded suggestion, Draal begged, "Father … you wouldn't dare."

"Yes, I would. It is far time the Trollhunter departed. Now, my son, grab your old sword set. It's in the corner I believe … and then help your slightly injured but fully capable father out the window. We have a prophet to find before Aaarrrgghh or Blinky come to check on us."

Draal resisted the urge to laugh, pride blooming in his chest. He hadn't hunted with his father in ages so he hoped their search would be fruitful. And with that, he put his old sword set on his back and then proceeded to help the Trollhunter out of the window.

…

"I can't believe I'm breaking and entering on a school night," said Jim to himself as he pulled on a thick black glove. Thankfully, he had enough dark clothes to begin with. He was sure part of his ensemble was a previous Gun Robot villain's cosplay from that convention Tobias and he had gone to. The two of them had wanted to be original so they had dressed as one-episode-only villains. Their costumes had done pretty well. He even had a hood despite the hockey mask that was on his bed just waiting to be fitted to his face.

He still couldn't believe what he was doing, but he had to get the Fetch and that scrying crystal. Strickler may have merely walked over to them to chat … or he could have been trying to get the crystal to point at them. Either way, he needed to grab it and the Fetch.

"And while you are at it, why don't you grab a piece of the bridge, Jimbo, and defeat Bular, *again*," grumbled the teenager at himself before he stopped affixing his dark clothing. He then buried his head

in his hands and swallowed. This needed to be done, armor or not, and then he was finished.

Personally, part of him just wanted to go and knock at the entrance of Troll Market and tell Kanjigar to deal with this, but he didn't want to interfere too much. He didn't want to be sucked in again. He was given his chance for a semi-normal life, and he wasn't going to mess it up again by being anything other than anonymous.

"Now, just wait for mom to go to bed," said Jim as he looked at the clock. It was barely nine-thirty. Ugh, he thought it would take longer to put his getup together, but nooo. Well, he could crawl out his window he supposed.

Putting his hockey mask on for face in case he fell face first into the ground, the lanky teenager opened his window and slipped out with a hockey stick and backpack on. He had a few oddities like a pan (he now had an incomplete set after all), some rope he fashioned into a grappling hook and a few fireworks as a distraction. He still felt terribly under-equipped for breaking and entering, but he knew the territory already and even if one of the goblins saw him, he had his mask and hood.

He just hoped his stamina would hold out if he needed to run. He already knew that his muscle tone wasn't the same as in his past life. He missed it. In fact, he had been dwelling on maybe joining the local dojo with Tobes. Toby was awesome with a hammer and Jim wouldn't mind picking up a sword again, even if it was a training one.

Regardless, he still had his instincts and quick reactions. It had to be enough tonight.

Slipping onto the roof outside his window, the boy slid down the rain gutter and was just about to run into the woods when he suddenly had to dodge … a tennis ball?

Blinking behind his hockey mask, he yelped as he dodged two more yellow balls in quick precession, the attacker finally rolling out of a nearby bush.

"Hands in the air, you M-Michael Myers wanna-be! Did you attack Jim and his mom?! Huh? Answer me you cat burglar?!" shouted Tobes as he pointed his homemade ball-gun at the darkly clad figure that had just left his best friend's window.

Huh, he forgot Tobias owned that ball launcher. It was back from that

Nerf gun phase they had gone through. Each day they would ambush each other with increasingly bigger Nerf guns until Tobias stepped it up … with the tennis ball gun. They knocked out a window or two when Jim got ahold of his mom's old tennis racket and that was the end of that.

Nonetheless, he supposed a hooded and masked figure escaping his best friend's window warranted some suspicious.

"Jim!" finally called Toby up to the open window. "Jim, are you okay?!"

Jim, at first not concerned, watched in horror as his mom perked up on the couch, Toby's yell pulling her from her partial sleep.

Not knowing what else to do, Jim lifted up his mask and tried to silence the other boy, "Sshhh! Tobes, it's me. Stop shouting!"

Stalling, lowering his ball-gun, Toby raised a brow, "Jim? Is that you? … In your old cosplay costume? What's going on?"

"Quiet, Tobes. Get down," demanded Jim as he grabbed his best friend by his pj's collar and pulled them both under the window sill as his mom peeked outside.

Slapping a hand over his friend's mouth as Toby tried to keep talking, Jim watched the silhouette of his mom's shadow on the grass for a moment until she finally closed the blinds. Likely, she was finally going to bed.

Sighing, he released Tobias' mouth and wiped the drool in the grass. Toby always was a little drooly after a visit to the dentist's office. "Dude, what's going on with you? You were weird the other day with the basement thing; then you got all weird about Strickler since he went on a date with your mom; and now you're dressed like a Batman villain."

"It's wasn't a date!" hissed Jim.

"Bro, I love you. So I gotta tell you the truth. I saw that dopey look on your mom's face when we got … home … from … school … today." Toby suddenly stopped talking and then looked from the hockey mask to the stick on the taller boy's back. His hands hurriedly grabbed Jim's jacket as if to shake him. "Jim! Killing Mr. Strickler isn't the answer. There are easier ways to keep your mom single! Mr. Strickler isn't worth it."

“What?” said Jim as he tried to peel his friend’s fingers off. “I’m not going to kill him.”

Though he really wanted to.

“Then why are you dressed like Freddy Krueger?! Jim, I’m your best friend, but I don’t have the stamina to help you bury a body.”

Rolling his eyes, a part of him a little charmed that Toby basically said he would help him bury a body, Jim defended himself … kind of. “Oh, please Tobes. If anything, I look more like a skinny Jason Voorhees. And though I have no plans to kill Mr. Strickler, I can tell you that he is assuredly evil.”

Giving Jim a confused look, Toby was too his feet, “That’s it. I’m waking up your mom. Your head is now in la-la crazy town. I don’t think crazy runs in your family, but your mom might know.”

Rushing to his feet, Jim slid in front of his best friend, putting his hands up in a show of peace, “Wait, wait. Stop Tobes. I can explain…”

So, not wanting to lose his oldest friend if he was caught in a lie, Jim told Toby the truth about him being the Trollhunter. The words escaped him like a breaking dam. His mind was so heavy he almost wanted to sob in relief for finally getting to tell someone. Mind you, he told Tobias this had all been a dream, but otherwise, he told Toby all the details he felt were relevant. Not everything, for who can stick months of their life into fifteen minutes, but he hoped it was enough that Tobes would understand that he had to go gallivanting off into the night to stop changelings and goblins.

“And that’s why I’m dressed like this. I have to get the Fetch from the museum to save Claire’s brother. I also need to get the scrying crystal from last night because I’m certain that was why my mom was attacked in her car,” finished Jim, feeling exhausted as he looked to his best friend for acceptance.

Tobe’s, standing there barefoot in the cool grass with an expression between horror and awe, finally snapped his jaw shut as if in thought. “First of all … I will be changing all of my usernames to Warhammer. And second of all, I will be coming with you.”

Jim, watching Toby putter towards his house, didn’t know if he should be horrified or ecstatic that someone believed him. “So … you believe me that it was like a premonition or past life or something?”

Lugging his plastic gun over his shoulder, Tobes simply said, “No, I think you are crazier than a bowl of fruit loops, but as your oldest friend I can tell you won’t let this rest until proven otherwise. So, let's go commit a felony. If we get caught, at least we will look bad ass. Now, give me twenty minutes. Hopefully, I sill fit in my Buzz-Zee Gun Robot cosplay. That way, if we have to take police photos, we can look awesome.”

Jim was stuck between wanting to laugh and beg Tobes to stay out of it, but like with the last life, he knew he couldn’t keep Tobes out of it. He couldn't then and certainly wouldn’t be able to now. So, he sat on Tobias’ back step patiently as his chubby friend put something more supervillain-worthy on than break-in appropriate, but he supposed Tobias was right. If they got arrested again like in the last timeline, at least they would have some epic mug shots.

Or … they at least would look badass before being eaten.

Chapter End Notes

> All the feels needed more time than usual to escape my head like the little word-gremlins they are (Huh, I wonder if the series is going to have gremlins?). I personally feel I need to blame/thank Forever-Furuba for Draal’s background scene in this given the tangent we both went on. I also kind of regret leaving out Barbara and Walt’s first not-date. I really love those two as a pairing regardless of how dysfunctional it is. Nonetheless, lots of buildup in this chapter … next chapter promises to be interesting for sure. Maybe. Or it might just be more buildup or a scene of Barbara making tea. Meh, as an unreliable author I’m not to be trusted. I can sometimes be a trololololol.
>
> ♪~ ᕕ(ᐛ)ᕗ

Fight or Flight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim thought he would never feel it again. This excitement. This rush of adrenaline as he headed towards danger. He knew that he should be cringing internally. He was not endowed with magical armor or a sword. He didn't have the muscle mass or stamina of his previous life. And to top it off, he was putting Tobes in danger. His oldest friend … who somehow made every situation hilarious even when it was not.

Forget about being arrested, they were going to have the most hilarious deaths ever.

They were even dressed for the occasion…

"… Really, the museum? I don't know if I should be disappointed or impressed," said Tobias nonchalantly as he leaned forward on his handlebars as they stopped across the street from the museum; he looked almost bored behind his yellow and black goggles. "I mean … I thought trolls were supposed to be scary from the way you described them earlier, but now all I can imagine is that they are hipsters and art geeks if this is their hideout."

Jim quickly lost his train of thought as he imagined trolls in hipster clothes. He immediately banished the thought and turned back to Tobes, "Please … never say that again. The idea of Bular drinking soymilk and wearing a fedora while texting is traumatizing."

Tobes merely leaned forward farther, grinning in a way befitting of a villain's costume, "Well, at least you would know he wouldn't be up to anything … since, you know, he'd be a hipster."

Despite himself, Jim had to swallow a laugh while trying to take on a somber tone, "We need to take this seriously, Tobes. Bular is dangerous and we might die horribly in there. I mean, Bular wears skull pants for goodness sake. He's not a hipster."

Toby, still thinking this was all a delusional dream of a stressed-out Jim, tried to look earnest for a total of three seconds before he realized that they were out in the middle of the night in cosplay costumes hunting imaginary monsters. He snorted and nearly fell off his bike as he choked on his own spit, "Pffff, skull pants?! Talk about

tacky. And what … the gremlins are the equivalent of purse dogs? *Please say yes*."

Rolling his eyes, Jim waved his arms in explanation. "Okay, it's more like a loincloth, and now that I think about it … gross. Second of all, its goblins and they are more like angry spindly-legged French men."

Trying to hold in his laughter, Tobes asked, "So, they might yell at me and throw baguettes?"

Jim tried to glare at Tobes, unsure if he should be angry or not, for even though he was slightly irritated that Tobias was only humoring him, he still remembered the teen with a cursed hammer. In this new-world, Tobias was still his backup … even if all he had was his terrible wit and a tennis ball gun. He couldn't ask for a more loyal friend, even if he had entirely too much *sass* for a breaking and entering.

Rolling his eyes, Jim sighed, "Fine, let's see if you laugh when we are nearly murdered by man-eating troll-sters. Grab your tennis gun and through the window we go. Last time the alarm went off when we ran out the front doors and not the window. I can only guess that the window is another way for the goblins to get in and out. So … don't freak out when we see some. They can smell fear."

…

Thirty minutes later, Tobias was trying his best to not smell like fear. How someone didn't do that, he didn't know, but if Jim hadn't covered his mouth he was sure that the totally-not-angry-little-French-men mutant goblin monsters would have eaten them already. And so, they sat there behind a pot display, dressed in costumes worthy of bad cat burglars.

It seemed to take forever for the little beasts to eat out of all the garbage cans in the room, lick a few of the glass displays, fight over a sharpie marker and finally leave.

"Okay," said Jim, his eyes looking strangely ghoulish behind his mask in the dim lighting of the museum, "Don't scream … or panic … or flail … or much of anything you usually do when scared or panicked … or happy … or excited … or sad. Uh, you get the point. I'm gonna release your mouth … slowly."

Removing his hand, Jim nearly suffered whiplash as Tobias grabbed him by the front of his jacket and shook him, whisper-screaming to the best of his abilities, "*Monsters! Are! Real! Why didn't you tell me?!"*

Frowning behind his mask, Jim slowly pried himself free and stood, peaking around a corner as he whispered back, “I literally told you there were trolls and goblins about an hour ago. You called them hipsters and purse-dogs, Tobes.”

Rising to his feet as well, hugging his oversized tennis-ball gun to his chest, Tobias swallowed his dry tongue a few times and whispered, “So, if what you told me is true … there are evil trolls then? *That eat people*.”

“Yes, Tobes, which is why *we need to stay quiet*. Now, let’s find the crate the Fetch is supposed to be in. I remember the size so hopefully its already here … and hopefully, it is nowhere near the bridge room yet either because if Bular is here he’s in that room, and I don’t feel like being mauled and/or eaten tonight,” finished the other teenager.

“Agreed,” said Tobes as they turned another corner, the other boy surprisingly adapting quickly.

It took about twenty more minutes of running down halls and dodging goblins (thankyou Nugget Yummy distraction) to get to the loading dock of the museum where all the bigger displays and packages came in. It was then traditional cat burger-ling at its finest, Tobes and Jim prying open smaller wooden boxes. They found some ancient pottery, what might have been a mummified hand and a Norse hammer.

Tobes, looking at the magnificent hammer, recalled Jim’s quick mention that he had had an awesome hammer in his not-life. He couldn’t help but wonder … had he been any good with it? Was he kick ass? Could he be kick ass again? Had he finally got his braces off? So many questions …

“It’s not here,” finally growled Jim as he crawled out of a large crate, looking at the small buckler shield he had dug out and suddenly longing for his own. “I think we need to check the bridge-room.”

“Isn’t that where the boss-level-murder-troll is located? Can we not? Besides, aren’t we going to the museum in a few days anyway? Can’t we just slip away and try again? It’s obviously not here,” said Toby logically.

Sighing, terrified he was going to let Claire down again, Jim slowly nodded, “Yeah, you are right. I suppose we can try to get the scrying stone instead tonight. We’ll have to break into Strickler’s house … or office, but if we break into his office we may have to run afterward. Murder cloud and all.”

Face morphing into dismay, Tobias asked, “So … we have to break into two maybe three places tonight and fight a *murder cloud*?”

Shrugging, Jim was about to throw out a ‘*what’s two more felonies*’ excuse when suddenly the loading dock door started screeching as it slid up. Tobes stood there like a deer in the headlights before Jim grabbed him and pulled them both behind the huge wooden crate he had been rummaging through. He pulled the shield close and put a hand over Toby’s mouth just in case. He prayed it was just more goblins, but the two voices that echoed into the storage area proved otherwise.

“Scrying with the pot wasn’t successful last night, Bular. So, I don’t know why you are so adamant to try it again tonight. Last night was inconclusive. The pot obviously wasn’t personal enough,” argued Strickler as he followed in behind the hulking giant that was Bular, dusting himself as if this entrance to the museum was beneath him.

The Gumm Gumm grunted, baring his teeth for a moment as he growled, “Well, then go down to where I defeated the son of Kanjigar last night. I hope his blood on the wall is *personal* enough. If I can’t have the hooded boy, I will have the champion’s son. Given the hooded whelp saved Kanjigar, the coward, we can probably get the information we need from the teal fool.”

Jim, peaking around the corner, swallowed as he thought of Draal being dragged into this. It just seemed too cruel to imagine. Draal finally got more time with his father … only to be the one torn away this time around. It wasn’t that he doubted Draal’s skill, but he could only recall the teal troll’s zombified state the last time he had seen him in the old life… a mindless thing dragging himself down the school's halls like a cripple. It wore on him silently like so many other things in his old life.

Well, at least he knew the scrying crystal was here. This wasn’t all a loss. He’d get the Fetch later. Right now, he just had to wait for an opening to grab the little glowing crystal Stricklander had. Maybe they’d even put it down. He just had to communicate this to Tobes and then tonight would be a win for team good. He just had to think out a quick, flawless plan.

“Wait. I smell something off … familiar … yet like cat ….and why are these crates open?” came Bular’s voice.

Or he could just wing it. He was good with that.

Strapping the old buckler shield onto his hand, surprised that it fit like a glove, he grabbed the tennis gun and growled to Tobes, “Grab the little blue glowing crystal from the shorter one while I distract them. Then, once you got it, we run.”

Stricklander barely had time to look surprised when Jim jumped up onto one of the wooden crates and started shooting off tennis balls like he was a gunslinger taking his final stand. Walt, in his changeling form, quickly got a tennis ball to the face before he could get his throwing knives out and yelped as he covered his eyes. Bular looked surprised for a total of ten seconds before he seemed to realize who was before him.

“Traitorous hooded whelg-guh!”

He had opened his mouth at the perfect moment to receive a tennis ball to the back of the throat and immediately started choking, only to get a barrage of tennis balls to the face as he stumbled back. Toby, a collection of *oh-my-gosh-oh-my-gosh* chanting forming in the background, finally gathered a warrior’s squeal in his throat and ran forward towards Stricklander. He almost faltered when Strickler made a blind swipe with one of his knives, but then seemed to remember he had a giant hammer and basically dropped it on one of Stricklander’s knees as he made a clumsy swing with it.

The changeling went down with a pained yelp, the scrying crystal tumbling from his grasp with a small tinkling sound. Toby, still screaming, picked it up and showed it to his partner in crime. Jim shot off a few more tennis balls before running forward with his buckler in hand, slamming it right into Bular’s face so he would trip farther back and away from their escape route. He then grabbed Toby by his cape and pulled him past the hulking giant, hoping that Bular was too busy choking and tripping to make a decent grab at them.

Running past, even though they were still in death’s grip, Tobe’s still had time to cry, ‘Aweeeesommmee!’ as he clicked an action selfie with Strickler and Bular in the background. And then they were running out into the night.

A minute later, a collection of goblins rushed in because of the noise. For a moment, they watched Bular choke. Right when the little monsters started to take bets if he would live or die, Bular managed to cough up the tennis ball, the wet glob bouncing off a crate and hitting a random goblin.

"... Well! What are you waiting for! Chase after the interlopers!" barked Bular as he wiped the drool from his chin and ran outside, roaring in excitement at the prospect of the hunt. The goblins, giving a rallying cry, followed after like a plague of locusts.

Walter, meanwhile, sat there babying his knee and probably his pride. All of the beasts were gone before he could retort. He was left behind. Sighing, bitterly muttering, Walt groused to no one, "Don't mind me … I'll just stay here."

…

Draal shifted through the shadows of a Nasty Burger, the dumpster smell behind the restaurant filling his nose in a tempting way. If he wasn't currently on the hunt with his father, he would have stopped for a quick snack.

Watching his father take a deep breath and then release it, he noticed that his sire frowned before whispering, "It's strange. We were originally in the suburban area, but now the hooded boy's scent is leading us to the inner city. From my interpretations of human children, it is abnormal for them to be out this late. I fear our young prophet might actually be a changeling given the behavior."

"And we forgot the burlap sacks," said Draal as he finished his father's thoughts.

"Yes, we forgot the sacks. I do not look forward to being scratched or bit by a changeling-boy for I doubt he will come of his own accord," said Kanjigar as he tried to not look at the wrappings around his upper arm.

"Don't worry, father. I will carry the hooded boy if it comes to that," said Draal, part of his mind wondering if the hooded whelp should be called an informant more than a prophet. He hadn't heard the foretellings yet, but he found it unlikely that something like a changeling would have such power as his father described.

Humming in response, the older troll inhaled the cool night air and immediately frowned before swinging around, his armor and sword appearin g along with a strong battle stance. Draal was withdrawing his blades a moment later as well as he smelled trolls behind them … only to stall when the light from Kanjigar's armor revealed who had snuck up behind them. He immediately ran a hand down his face and groaned in frustration.

Behind them, Blinky stood with his arms crossed over his chest in obvious disappointment while Aaarrrgghh's joints popped out of place so he could squeeze out of the manhole as well.

Kanjigar sighed and looked disappointed while Draal mentally prepared himself to be nagged. Really, how could Blinky sneak up on them almost soundlessly and yet could badger them on a near Vendel-level? All he needed was a staff and Blinky probably could be Vendel's next in line.

At the thought, Draal twitched in horror.

"Master Kanjigar, how could you go back on your word? Vendel will be livid. You vowed to stay at Draal's side," argued Blinky, waving two sets of his arms.

"And I am … right next to my son," said Kanjigar with far more cheek than was necessary.

Draal did his best not to snort in humor.

Rolling most of his eyes, Blinky added, "I think Vendel's ultimatum had more than literal proximity in mind, Master Kanjigar. You do know he is planning to rewrap your wounds once more before daybreak. Will you be so audacious then?"

Willing away his sword and armor, the Trollhunter smiled slightly as he headed towards the street, "Probably. Since we have a few more hours before his return. He won't even notice my missing. Now, where were we?"

"And if Vendel comes back early? He has trapping stones, Master Kanjigar, and I'm sure he will use them," added Blinky as he started to follow after his old friend. He honestly didn't expect Kanjigar to listen to him, but no one could say he didn't try to at least advise him. Not that he expected Kanjigar to complain if he became entrapped by the yellow barrier. He was too moral for that … but he did have this kicked gnome look to him that could make a lost whelp run for his money. Vendel had long become immune to it, but Aaarrrgghh could still be swayed from time to time.

Kanjigar stalled as if to consider it for a moment for nothing was truly more torturous to the Trollhunter than being forced to stay still, but he seemed to regain his zeal second later, stating simply, "I have a duty to uphold and I must stand by it, Blinkous. I will not be dissuaded to do otherwise."

Then, before he could even step into the lamplight and cross the intersection, a roar echoed down the dead street. All four trolls stalled and Kanjigar immediately summoned his sword and armor again, lip curling in a show of anger and slight discomfort. It was a sound they all were familiar with.

“Bular.”

The Trollhunter and company didn’t even get to wander from their alley and search for the origin of the roar when a whining sound started, growing closer and closer like an airy alarm. They all looked at each other, uncertain of the direction. It almost sounded like a bleating goat and they might have worried it was one supernatural force or another when suddenly the bleat developed into a girly scream. It was barely even a flash as a human on a bicycle rushed past the alleyway.

The cyclist was a pudgy, yellow and grey clad human with almost comically short legs as his short cape blew in the wind. He was the squealing alarm, his teeth glinting in the lamplight. And there, barely clinging to the seat, was another lanky human dressed just as questionable in all black and blue, too may buckles all over his clothes to seem reasonable. His strange ensemble was topped with a hood and a white mask full of holes. This human’s blue eyes took a second to stare in surprise at the four trolls in the passing alley before he finished reloading a plastic gun he had on hand, lifted it up like a bazooka and fired yellow orbs at something behind them.

Then, as quickly as they had come, they were gone. Kanjigar and the others didn’t even get to look at each other in confusion when another roar echoed over the expanse … Bular running by on all fours while being promptly followed after by a hoard of goblins. Said tailgaters passed the alley just as quickly, a few goblins making rude hand gestures as they passed by.

Standing still for a moment, all of the good trolls probably wondering if it was a mass delusion, Draal said what they were all thinking first, “Did those little monsters just insult our mothers?”

“Yes, their Gallaaack was quite spot on for a pack of vulgar and foul-handed heathens,” said Blinky calmly before he followed up, “And I also find in impromptu to not inquire … but that was our young Prophet, wasn’t it?”

“Smelled like him,” agreed Kanjigar.

“Mmhhmm, spicy … I also smell cat,” agreed Aaarrrgghh as he nodded.

The ensuing hustle of good trolls to join the race was almost comical. Each of them nearly tripping over each other to join the ridiculous rat race down the street.

Chapter End Notes

> God, I wish I had a working scanner. I would total draw the bike scene or at least Tobe’s and Jim’s costumes. They are so cheesy-awesome in my mind that I can’t even … Anyway, this chapter was fun. Now, cue the Benny Hill montage. ヾ(⌐■_■)ノ♪

Battle Flamingos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m out, Tobes! I’m out!” cried Jim as his last tennis ball slammed into Bular’s horn and bounced off towards one of the nearby houses and into a window from the sound of it. Jim wasn’t sure how they had gotten down to the housing district, but this could either be a very good thing or a bad thing. Either way, he threw the tennis ball gun a second later at Bular to see if it would slow the hulking beast down. Nope. It only seemed to make him angrier, the large troll now frothing at the mouth as he sped up.

Yep, they were going to die like this. Bicycle chase gone wrong.

“I’m going to eat your pudgy friend’s legs in front of you when I finally catch you!” threatened the Gumm Gumm as he got close enough to make a swipe at Jim on the back of the bicycle.

Jim, in reaction, slammed the paw away with his buckler shield, nearly falling off the bike at the same moment as Toby swerved uncontrollably before picking up speed.

“I like my legs! What are we going to do?!” cried Tobias as he turned his head back slightly and pedaled faster as Bular drew closer and closer. “I can’t die like this! I haven’t even been in a real girl’s room or sat on a real girl’s bed or pushed a real girl’s hair behind her ear! I can’t die like this!”

Jim wanted to argue that his nanna was a real girl, but no one wanted that to be their last words in case they were caught and devoured. In fact, he needed to think of something constructive. Now, where could they hide? Jumping fences seemed idiotic given Tobes sucked at jumping fences, little legs and all, and Bular could just plow through said fences like an enraged bull. He needed more time to think … and ammo.

A flash of pink caught his eye and Jim immediately had an idea as he barked, “To the flamingos!”

Panting, Tobes jumped the curb to the sidewalk lined with plastic pink flamingos. Most would find them to be an eyesore, but to Jim, they were *just gorgeous*.

Grabbing all the plastic lawn decorations that he could by their spindly plastic necks, Jim looked into the fake bird's plastic eyes in apology and then shouted, "I'd hate to flip you the bird, but it's time we flew the coop!"

He then proceeded to uproot plastic flamingos and chuck them as hard as he could at Bular. The troll faltered for a few steps if only from surprise … and that was all the time Draal needed.

Next thing the ex-Trollhunter knew, a familiar death ball of blue suddenly came barreling into the scene from behind a newly constructed house, uprooting grass as he went. Draal then slammed right into the distracted Gumm Gumm like a wrecking ball, the two of them flung into a nearby koi pool with a resounding splash.

Jim wanted to thank Draal as the teal troll unrolled with a bellow and proceeded to punched the downed Bular in the face, but he wasn't even supposed to know Draal's name in this world. He just had to be thankful for the distraction as he watched Kanjigar suddenly slide out of nowhere and double-team the dark troll.

Now, to get rid of the goblins still chasing them. Eaten by goblins was not on his bucket list. Plus, Toby really should get to kiss a girl before he died. After all, even if it was in his not-life, Jim would always have that first memory of kissing Claire.

Shaking off his heavy thoughts, Jim continued his verbal assault on the goblins instead.

"You are looking a little green," cried Jim, feeling a rush that only came from battle. "Maybe pink is more your color!"

He then preceded to throw the few flamingos he still had at the charging goblins. A few of the spindly creatures were immediately on the poor plastic constructs as if they were real birds threatening to fly away …while another goblin seemed to sweep his plastic flamingo down into a romantic dip to try and serenade it. Yeah, he didn't need to see any more of that. Maybe he should throw something else for a while.

"Lamest … line … ever," interrupted Tobes as he took a sharp turn. "Really … who … writes … your … one … liners? Your … mom?"

Smiling behind his mask, glad that Tobes had a sense of humor even when they were being chased by flesh-eating monstrosities, Jim jested, "Well, I didn't want our last words to be something lame like,

‘Aaaaaaaah’ so I improvised. It’s the best I could come up with on short notice. So, if you are disappointed with the writing quality, you should file a complaint with your nanna.”

Tobes snorted and then said, “You … could … have … said … ‘Say … hello … to … my … pink … friend.’”

Jim rolled his eyes at the *Scarface* reference. “That’s hardly better. Now, to the last house while most of them are distracted. We will hide over in the housing construction under the flooring or something. The wet dirt might hide our scents.”

Seeing a construction site before them, he patted Tobias’ shoulder, yet just when they were getting near one of the partially completed structures, there was a bark to their side. It was shortly followed with a cry of ‘*no’* from who he presumed was Kanjigar. Then, Bular was coming up to their starboard side, Kanjigar and Draal behind him and being mobbed by goblins. Jim didn’t even get time to take in a breath when the Gumm Gumm decided to backhand the bike with both of the passengers on it. Jim wasn’t sure if it was Tobias or him that had screamed when they both went flying through the partially constructed walls of the housing project.

The only thing Jim knew for sure was that Bular was laughing and that it was the end of the line. The chase was over.

…

“Not good. Not good,” repeated Blinky as he watched the bike get slammed by Bular, the two human figures and the bicycle flying into a partially completed house.

When rushing after the parade of idiocy, Kanjigar had given Aaarrrgghh and him one directive: *grab the two whelps while Draal and I distracted Bular*. That was all they had to do. Grab the two boys when Bular was distracted.

Now … the prophet was probably dead, and Blinky had yet to completely figure out the first warning. Wonderful. Just wonderful.

Nonetheless, sharing a worried look with Aaarrrgghh, the two trolls fell over a nearby fence –well, mostly Blinky fell- and hurried to the construction site. Bular was faster though, causing both trainers to slide behind a large caterpillar and peek around the heavy equipment's front.

The skinny whelp with chicken legs seemed to stir first, shaking his pudgy friend as he whispered, “Tobes. Tobias?! Wake up. Tobes…”

Even from here … Blinky could smell the blood.

“Well, at least that saves me from having to chase both of you,” finally came Bular’s voice as he walked through the wooden skeletal frame of the house, plastic tarping hiding his form until his glowing red eyes appeared in what would one day be a doorframe. “Not that it would have been much of a challenge on foot.”

Rising to his feet, blood dripping down his pant leg from the wooden shards that made it through his clothing, Jim raised his small shield defiantly and groused, “I’m not afraid of you, Bular.”

Humming to himself as he looked up at the wooden beam above his head, Bular reached upward and snapped it in half, stepping into the skeletal room without having to dip. For a moment he merely stood there in the semi-darkness, the moon and Bular’s glowing red eyes seeming to be the only objects of illumination in the darkness. The Gumm Gumm’s observant gaze was unnerving, but Jim refused to yield from his stance in front of Tobias’ still form.

“I am curious, *whelp*, as to how you know my name? The order is adamant that there are no rogue changelings in the area … and last I checked, Kanjigar and the other trolls were lacking in human companionship. So, who are you or *what* are you, and what do you stand to gain from your little *interruption* during my duel?”

Jim swallowed heavily. Given that Bular had so much weight and skill to throw around, he sometimes forgot that Bular could be cunning and conniving as well. Apparently, he had gained more attention that he suspected the day he saved Kanjigar.

“It’s not much of a mystery … you are not exactly subtle,” said Jim as he tried to deflect the question, raising his shield higher as Bular took a threatening step closer.

“And neither are you, *interloper*. It couldn’t be a coincidence that you came to the bridge at the exact moment I was about to slay the Trollhunter and prepared no less. You also do not have the strength to be a warrior and yet to try to move like one. You know too much and even hide your face,” he growled as he seemed to wander around Jim, eyeing him critically as if deciding if he was warrior or prey. “Some like a mystery … I do not.”

Jim barely had time to blink when Bular was lashing out with a clawed hand towards his face. Somehow, he managed to trip backward gracelessly, though he did feel a claw make contact with his hockey mask.

Stumbling a little farther away at the realization, heart pounding, Jim brought his shield up higher so he could peek over it yet hide his face. Bular had been aiming for his head … or his mask.

Laughing at Jim's sloppy stumble, Bular growled, "I'm sure that the changelings can drag it out of you if I cannot!"

Bular made another grab for the teenager, but this time Jim jumped behind a sawhorse and while on the dirt he saw a nail gun. He really didn't have much experience with construction, he had chosen the culinary arts over woodshop, but he still stood up and started shooting nails wildly like he was in *Scarface* … in honor of Tobes.

Barking in surprise as three-inch nails started flying towards him, Bular brought his arm up to protect his face as the metal projectiles embedded themselves slightly into the large troll's arm and upper horns. Unfortunately for Jim, Bular only took the barrage for about thirty seconds before he suddenly raged forward, somehow flinging the sawhorse to the side along with the power cord attached to the power tool, successfully disarming Jim in a single motion.

Hissing in surprise as he nearly lost a finger in the exchange, Jim tried to roll out of the way once more. Instead, Bular had had enough and grabbed the teen by one of his retreating legs. He then flung Jim into the partially constructed fireplace, nearly knocking him unconscious from the impact alone.

Wheezing as his vision went spotty for a moment, once again reminded that he didn't have magical armor to take the brunt of the impact, Jim tried to get his body up and moving again but his limbs were just so heavy. It was like he was weighed down by gravity and was forced to sit there as Bular prowled over to him, ripping partially embedded nails out of stone skin with each word.

"I … am … not … amused … whelp," growled Bular, a nail being flung to the ground with each word. He was standing over Jim before the teen could even whine in pain, plucking him up by his throat and dangling him off the ground a few inches. "Now tell me how you know my name and why you interfered, or I will make you watch me eat your little friend. Limb by limb."

Bringing up his lethargic hands, Jim tried to beat on the stone-flesh paw that held him up, but his strength was fading as well as the oxygen in his lungs. He couldn't pull in another breath to speak even if he wanted to. He was going to suffocate and then Tobes was going to die for his stupidity. He had asked for a second life. A quiet life without the responsibilities of being the Trollhunter, and what does he do? He fucks it up, just like last time.

Sputtering now, his limbs losing coordination, the costume-clad teenager suddenly found himself on the ground again, gasping for air. Bular merely stood over him, seemingly bored with this little game yet impossibly impatient.

"Well?"

Dragging air in, his throat stung yet Jim's voice managed to come out as a wheeze. "P-leeeasssse. He … He … dddooeesssn't know-know anything. Wwwweee dddon't knoww anything."

Pulling another nail out of his forearm, Bular flicked it at Jim and gave him a look that basically said he didn't believe him. He then huffed and turned to Tobe's unconscious form. "Well, if he's useless … there's no point in keeping him around, now is there?"

Jim tried to scramble after those heavy feet, to hold the aggressor back, anything, but he couldn't find the strength or the words. What would he say? I killed you in a past life and that's how I knew your name? That he just magically knew? That he was the not-Trollhunter? Nothing he said would spare them.

They were going to die.

Suddenly, Bular halfway across the partially constructed room, there was a metallic roar, lights raining down on the scene like divine intervention. It took Jim a second to realize that the caterpillar just outside had been brought to life, it's headlights blinding the angry troll. Then, a familiar voice yelped and called out as the heavy equipment lurching forward like an angry buffalo.

"I have no idea what I'm doing!" cried Blinky as the yellow vehicle rushed forward towards the construction site.

Eyes going wide as he realized both Tobes and him could really get crushed, Jim struggled to his feet in time to roll Tobes and himself out of the way just as the giant yellow CAT suddenly barged into the partially constructed house and straight into Bular, slamming the troll

into the fireplace. Simultaneously, wooden beams seemed to go everywhere and Jim was sure that both of them would be crushed. Yet, just as a heavy beam tumbled towards them, a blur of green fell over them taking the brunt of the punishment. Not that that helped Jim and his fading vision.

“Sweet Deya,” barked Blinky as he managed to put the CAT in park and trip out of the cab he barely fit into. He exchanged a quick glance with Bular as the larger troll’s eyes glared at him in pain and threat. The titan then bore his teeth, his voice striking fear into the trainer’s heart.

“You will pay for this.”

Bular than roared, likely calling either goblins or changelings to come to his aid and free him. Blinky almost fell in his hurry to get to the pile of rubble where the prophet and his pudgy friend had been. He instantly regretted hijacking the heavy machinery, for if the whelp was dead this all was for naught, when suddenly there was a growl and none other than Aaarrrgghh burst from the rubble. His body had formed a shield over the two humans, protecting them both from most of the barrage.

Neither boy stirred though, causing Blinky to frown.

“Are they both alright?” quickly asked Blinky, leaning over the two humans as if to get a look. He smelled more blood and both whelps seemed to be unconscious. “I dare say I can smell the blood from here."

“Both. Bleeding. Must go now,” agreed Aaarrrgghh as he carefully picked up each unconscious boy like a young whelp and placed them over his shoulder. “Goblins coming.”

Blinky, turning his head to see where Aaarrrgghh was staring, immediately twitched. There were already two goblins on top of the caterpillar, eyes glowing as if daring them to come near the pinned Gumm Gumm. Two goblins were hardly terrifying, even to Blinky, but where there were two goblins there would soon be more. Bular was currently trapped, but it would not be for long.

Nodding in agreement as two more goblins scampered over to the equipment and started pulling levers, Blinky promptly agreed, “Let us spirit away then, my friend. We found what we wanted and its best we take our victories where we can.”

And with that, the two trolls disappeared into the night.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know why I called the chapter that either … my friends say I’m eccentric so we’ll just chalk it up to that. XD

A Title to Bear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So,” said Blinky as they neared the last step into Troll Market, the smallest troll stopping to guard the entrance like a sphinx. “Perchance, has anyone decided how to explain the discovery of the prophet without Draal and Kanjigar leaving their bed furs? Once we enter town, we need to decide what to tell Vendel.”

“Oh, we aren’t going to tell him the truth about the Gumm Gumm parade that we partook in?” lightly jested Kanjigar, his armor disappearing. The troll immediately looked rough as some of his bandages came undone now that the armor was no longer there supporting it.

Blinky scoffed and then added flippantly, “If you are going to be like that, why don’t we just tell Vendel a step by step follow-through. Or better yet, we could put on a full reenactment. I’ll play my valiant self, brave in the face of danger as I piloted the vehicle that trapped Bular; Aaarrrgghh can play Kanjigar while Kanjigar can play the injured prophet. Bular, unsurprisingly, will be played by Draal.

“Hey,” frowned Draal. “Why do I have to be Bular?”

“And why am I human?” quipped Kanjigar.

“Well, the prophet can’t play himself due to being unconscious and due to your injured similarities, it would be the best fit,” argued Blinky.

Draal seemed to puff up, ready to defend himself in some way or another when Kanjigar waved it off, “Come Draal, we are just jesting. But in all seriousness, we should probably make haste and hurry back before Vendel notices our absence. We can argue about the casting later. Right now, we must away before Vendel-”

“Before Vendel what?” said a very grumpy voice.

Everyone stiffened and Blinky quickly peeked around the bottom of the steps to immediately be smacked in the side of the head by a walking stick. Vendel, stepping before the crew, looked as bitter and annoyed as usual.

Blinky, half of his eyes squinted, rubbed the side of his head where he had been hit by the staff. “Need you have done that? You could have taken out an eye.”

Vendel scoffed, “As if you do not have enough spares, and yes, I had to hit you. Given Kanjigar’s recent demotion from being a responsible adult, that title fell to you, and you failed most spectacularly Blinky. In fact, it might be a new record with how quickly you showed an utter lack of competent thought.”

“Now, see here Vendel,” started Blinky as he tried to defend his intellect. “I am a proprietor of knowledge and I don’t think-“

“Books not a wise troll make, Blinky,” grumbled Vendel, cutting off the younger troll as he stepped forward and lifted up Jim’s head slightly with a large claw so that he could get a look at him. “Now, come along you merry band of fools. I can see that your evening was at least fruitful … though I have no idea why you have two humans when you were supposed to only fetch one … If they are even humans at all.”

…

Vendel ran a glowing crystal over the prophet’s still body, the green light seeming almost sickly. He had sent Blinky off to wrap the pudgy whelp’s head for it seemed nothing more than a head-blow. Honestly, he was surprised that humans survived at all with such delicate skulls and bodies for that matter.

Unsurprisingly, the crystal glowed different colors whenever he happened upon a wound. It had been a long time since he had dealt with a human, it had felt like centuries even, but at least he wasn’t as bumbling as some of the other trolls when it came to fleshlings. It seemed to be a few bruised ribs from the look of it and a wounded leg. The leg needed to be cleaned, treated with healing herbs and bandaged.

He immediately walked over to his shelves upon shelves in the healing dwell, grabbing what he needed without a second thought. Truthfully, it was strange not to have a pot of boiling molten metal … though he was sure Kanjigar and Draal were exaggerating about minor wounds. One did not fight Bular and walk away without a few scars to show for their survival.

Nonetheless, the prophet was here and safe from Bular’s reach. And, in the grand scheme of things, they couldn’t ask for better luck.

Heading to the leg first, Vendel shredded the pant leg with a single claw and quickly went about his work. There were some shards of wood embedded in the whelp's calf, but nothing so deep that Vendel was concerned. He treated the wound quickly with knowing hands and wrapped it before human blood barely had time to stain his medical slab.

Next came the bruised ribs. He stared at the too-many-buckles jacket, wondering why human coverings were so complicated and unnecessarily intricate, when a deep exhale got his attention. He quickly glanced at the strange mask on the human's face. He knew that Kanjigar wanted to see the face of his young savior, but Vendel didn't see a point in waiting. He removed the mask carefully and stared at the youthful face below.

There was nothing special about the boy at first glance and so Vendel set the mask to the side without a second thought. He was now just contemplating cutting the jacket off because the garment was more a puzzle at this point than a piece of clothing when he heard a groggy groan.

He stilled and found himself grateful that the whelp had injured his leg … He was in no mood for a chase and humans always took meeting a troll badly.

Surprisingly, after those blue orbs blinked a few times in confusion, instead of screaming the human asked, "V-vendel. Am I in the healing dwell? Why am I here? What's going on? Ugh, why does everything hurt?"

Blinking in surprise, he wondered how the prophet knew his name for that matter their location. That information hadn't been part of the boy's prophecies. Then, realization hitting him, a dread settled in the old troll's gut. Prophets and oracle-types were the most common type of beings when it came to foresight, but there were other types of foresight as well. Unfortunately, those tales rarely ended well. He needed more information to know for sure though.

"Not surprising," said Vendel casually, wondering how long he could lead the disoriented boy on in order to get some type of confession. "You did take on Bular and a volley of goblins with nothing but some plastic lawn ornaments according to Blinky's ramblings."

The whelp blinked at him for a moment more as if confused, "Bular … but isn't he … I don't … lawn ornaments? … Why didn't I use my

sword?"

Vendel raised his brow in question. The only weapons they had found between the two whelps was an old hammer and a buckler shield. There hadn't been any swords. "What sword?"

Face scrunching up, the youth started, "What do you mean by: what sword? Day-"

His jaw suddenly snapped shut, his teeth actually clicking from the speed. The boy even looked around as if the horror of the situation was actually hitting him. "A-am I in Troll Market?"

Blinky, at this time, came forward from the back healing dwell and stared in surprise that the prophet was even awake. Vendel was sure it was what prompted the boy to flee … or at least he tried to.

Jim messily rolled off the stone slab and immediately fell to the floor with a yelp as his leg gave out. Blinky gasped at this and tried to rush around the table and help the human up, but the youth was already limping towards the exit. In fact, the boy didn't even look around, it was like he already knew where the exit was.

Of course, ever present, the noise drew Aaarrrgghh into the dwell and the large troll stopped in the doorway, stalling the limping human's retreat.

Vendel, deciding to stop this before it became some ridiculous chase, came forward with a click of his staff, his words sobering, "Running away will not solve anything, young one. We must speak."

The boy turned slightly and gave the aged figure a look as if saying that he strongly disagreed with that statement and was about to prove it.

Vendel continued unperturbed, coming closer and closer until he was towering over the short human. "Fleeing also won't answer your questions about what is going on, about what happened to you, or about these visions."

For a moment, the boy's face filled with worry, but his lips still remained tightly closed.

"Yes, please come back to the recovery slab. Young Prophet," agreed Blinky nervously as he wrung his hands together. After all, they had yet to check the two humans with a gaggle-tack to

see if either of them were changelings.

“Should we even call you that?” corrected Vendel, his gaze never leaving Jim. “For you are not a prophet, are you young one? No. I think you are something far rarer and more dangerous, aren’t you? You are in a completely different branch from prophets or oracles. A seer perhaps?”

Blinky, obviously surprised, turned to Vendel. He had been researching prophecies and the beings that foretold them but a seer was one of the fewer documented beings when it came to foresight. He knew enough though to feel his stomachs sink.

Beside himself, Blinky looked Jim directly in the eye even though his question was obviously towards Vendel. “A seer? He couldn’t be. The boy obviously foretold prophecies, determined messages, to Master Kanjigar. A Seer … a seer is an omen of troubled times ahead … their reins are generally short-lived.”

Blinky then seemed to want to say more, but his mouth had taken on a grim line like he was uncertain if he should say more in front of the boy. Jim, in turn, was getting his own sinking feeling. What did he mean by short-lived? Did it even matter? He wasn’t a seer. He didn’t have visions. He had lived that life. Vendel and Blinky obviously were misinterpreting the situation and didn’t know what they were talking about. He wasn’t really a seer or a prophet or anything like that.

He was just Jim. He was … He wasn’t the Trollhunter anymore. He was just Jim and it was better that way.

Nonetheless, he didn’t like this train of thought. In fact, his thoughts were starting to scatter like so many frighten birds even though the trolls truthfully knew nothing of the situation. And yet, Vendel managed to stab so deep, his next words strangely ominous.

“Well, what title fits you, young one? Prophet or seer?”

Yeah, Jim was done. Just *done*. He was not getting dragged further into this. He had paid his dues. He especially didn’t want his family and friends involved in this madness. And yet, just when he was wondering if he could slide under Aaarrrgghh with enough momentum … a scream echoed through Vendel’s dwell.

Everyone started … but none so much as Jim as a realization hit him. Was that Toby’s scream? Shit. Was Toby down here with him?!

Blinky jumped, immediately turning to the back dwell, before rushing off as he cried, “Oh no, the other one! He must have awakened!”

Jim blinked in surprise and the distraction was just enough for Vendel to quickly reach out and grab his arm. The old troll, just when Jim was going to kick out, suddenly snapped what looked like a gold bracelet around his wrist. Then, the little rune’s glowed blue for a moment on the item before the metal clasp tightened smoothly against his skin. When Jim tugged his arm, Vendel released him without any fight and immediately gripped his staff with both hands.

“What is this?” barked Jim, immediately feeling angry as he tried to pull the strange totem free. He knew immediately that it was a useless endeavor, but he still tugged at the band until he couldn’t stand its slowly tightening grip. Only when he relented did the bracelet go slack. Great, now he was cursed with troll jewelry. Could this night get any worse?

“It’s something to make you still and listen, young foreteller,” answered Vendel calmly before he looked at Aaarrrgghh and nodded towards Blinky as if telling him to go.

Aaarrrgghh only appeared weary for a moment before looking at the golden clasp and then nodding, walking past at a calm pace. Both trolls couldn’t help but notice that Jim didn’t even twitch in Aaarrrgghh’s presence, but it wasn’t until the green troll was out of hearing distance that Vendel spoke again.

“Well, little seer, how many lives have you lived? Or, more accurately, should I ask how man extra months or years do you think you have re-lived? Most seers are ambiguous about their visions or, more accurately, few have lived past a few months of waking from their dreamed-life to tell the full tale,” said Vendel seriously, noting how calm Jim was in his presence where a normal human would be panicking.

“What are you talking about?” asked Jim almost calmly, though Vendel did notice the sweat now gathering on the boy’s brow.

Sighing, feeling far too old for this, the aged troll spoke softly, “There are many types of foresight in this world. The seer is one of the more … emotionally devastating kinds of foresight unlike a prophecy or a simple reading, because a seer has trouble separating reality from the vision. In fact, they usually believe that they live that future and then came back. They also usually dreamed of themselves as an important

figure in the vision. This probably happens in order to get as much information as they can about an incident to effectively intercede, which is the greatest danger to seers. They believe they can-"

"Stop," suddenly interrupted the boy, Vendel watching the human's face morph into one of horror and disbelief. "Y-you're lying."

Slumping slightly, feeling worn down already by the situation and the seer's skittish acknowledgment, Vendel shook his head, "I am not, little seer. If you think you've lived a life, a time of importance and came back, it is a lie. Yes, those incidents you saw may occur, but you were never that being so you must not act on anything you recall … at least not on your own. Most seers die that way before they can even have a second vision."

Jim, at this point, looked petrified and yet seemed to be three seconds from tears. "Y-you lie."

Closing his eyes for a moment as if to brace himself, the aged troll softly said, "I do not. Now, please sit back down. Let me check your bandaging on your leg and then we can speak-"

Before he could even finish, Jim was running out the exit. It was greatly impeded by a limp, but Vendel made no move to stop him. Instead, he watched the boy go until he slowly turned his head, listening to soft footsteps come from behind him.

Watching the boy disappearing into Troll Market, seemingly knowing where he was going, he murmured, "How much did you hear Kanjigar?"

Rumbling for a moment as if in thought, the Trollhunter said, "Enough to be worried. I take it the band will not let him get far? I really must talk to him … once he calms down."

"It will allow him to go only far enough to collect himself," merely said Vendel. "It is not an easy burden to carry, the false-memories of a seer."

Shaking his head, wincing as he heard a shout from Blinky in the background and something break like a jar. "I doubt it is. Now … perhaps we should help Blinky. It doesn't sound like he's winning this battle."

"When does he ever?" joked Vendel as he turned, digesting what just happened. They now had a seer and human or not, he wasn't going far

with that boundary band. Knowing the Trollhunter's vow, Kanjigar might never let the poor seer out of his sight again. After all, at the rate he was going, the young thing was just going to get himself killed anyway. Seers were the unlucky sort.

Chapter End Notes

> Ba Ba Bummmmm! There, enjoy the cliffhanger. I am told I am good at them. Anyway, I only had to rewrite this chapter like three times and that's why it took so long. Plus, I'm pretty much out of pre-written chapters. Yep … enjoy the angst. >.>

Ghost Scorpions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Get a gaggle-tack they say. Sweet talk Rot and Gut they say. Get it in service to the Trollhunter they ask. Sorry we didn’t include you in our epic above ground chase they say,” muttered BaaAch to himself as he walked back from Rot and Gut’s.

He had gotten the gaggle-tack as asked and was now brooding. He knew that he had been less than excited when Draal and he had been sent aboveground in service of Troll Market earlier, but for some reason, he was painfully disappointed that he hadn’t gotten to be part of the epic chase tonight.

Shuffling forward, the red-orange troll suddenly stalled, horror creeping into every pore. Oh, no. No, no, no! This wasn’t happening!

He had been bitten by the adventure bug, hadn't he? And once that happened there was probably no going back. He would forget the pleasure and patience of colors mixing together, awakening each and every emotion in silent elegance. He would forget the simple want to observe and instead would want to be in the thick of things. He’d thrive to interrupt a stilled moment and its collection of lines and angles. He would want to move, to fight and laugh in the midst of battle. *Nights embrace*, he was probably going to end up as a bard now or an adrenaline battle-junky like Draal.

“Gunmar’s right eye, I’m becoming my father,” whispered BaaAch to himself in horror as he blew the hair out of his eyes. He then silently vowed to hand the gaggle-tack to Blinky or Aaarrrgghh without making eye contact or asking a single question. He would then head promptly home and stare at a still life until a muse came and conquered his adventure bug with the sharp tip of a pen.

Yep, that was his plan. He just had to head to the inner medical dwell, give the gaggle-tack to Blinky, leave and stare at a still life of an open tuna can. Yep, that was all he had to do. He was almost there. He was just going to ignore the conversations in the background. He just had to hand the gaggle-tack to Blinky and that was it. He could leave this madness behind before he got in too deep and ended up like an adventure crazed wanderer.

Almost there. He was in the secondary healing dwell and he was handing it to … Wait, where was Blinky?

Blowing the hair out of his eyes just to make sure he wasn't missing the strange historian, the artist stopped and dragged in a panicked breath when a pudgy human sitting on the healing slab met his gaze. He stared for a moment, holding as still as possible so he wouldn't frighten the squishy thing … but breathing apparently counted as movement.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

"Gahhhhhh!"

Now, it wasn't that BaaAch was terrified of humans or anything … it's just that when they scream in your face, it's completely normal to yelp back. It might even be a normal greeting for all he knew.

Though, apparently not, because it was enough to set the small human off and suddenly the whelp was throwing items off of Vendel's medical shelves at him. BaaAch, surprised when a jar of white scorpions hit him sqare in the face, tripped backward with a bark. He then winced a second later when the door to the nearby ingredients closet slammed shut, the boy blockading himself in if the sound of piling items was anything to go by.

It wasn't a second later that Blinkous was rushing over, watching BaaAch shake magical scorpions out of his hair.

"What happened?" asked the trainer as he walked over to the spare healing slab, looking behind it as if to make sure he wasn't merely overlooking the missing human. "Where did he go? I was barely gone for a stones time."

Flicking a scorpion off with a frown, BaaAch grumbled, "Well, the whelp woke up without his healer, saw me, and freaked out. He then threw a jar of crawlies at me and ran into the potions closet. Where I do believe he is blockading himself in."

"What?" asked Blinky with a frown. "The storage closet?"

Flicking off another strange white-scorpion in irritation as it crawled through his head-fuzz, BaaAch grumbled, "Yep, we'll probably have to break down the door to get him … and don't let him bite you. It looks like he has metal teeth."

Humming in curiosity, Blinky took a step back as a scorpion was flicked his way, “Must be a defense mechanism and careful, a sting from a ghost-scorpion to the eye will force your gaze into the spirit-realm.”

Standing there a moment in thought, a ghost scorpion running across the bangs over his eyes before burrowing back into his fur, BaaAch shrugged, “I'm not worried.”

“Of course, of course,” said Blinky awkwardly as Aaarrrgghh jogged over to them, “Now, I don’t know much of human child-rearing, but I do believe to calm a human whelp down … we have to sit on him.”

A wail suddenly escaped the human in the closet as if he had been listening and now he was packing even more items against the door.

“Hmm, skittish, isn’t he? Well, Aaarrrgghh, if you please? Can you break down the door?” asked Blinky as another wail of horror echoed behind the door.

Vendel and Kanjigar, having left Jim be, were now watching the whole motion of lunacy unfold, only to intervene when it became apparent that a door was about to be broken down.

“Blinkous,” interrupted Vendel, the elder troll’s staff echoing through the dwell as he demanded attention. “Having you no experience with whelps? I will not have you ruining a perfectly crafted door.”

Turning to give Vendel a disbelieving look, Blinky crossed his bottom pair of hands in complaint. “There is a huge difference between whelps and human children, Vendel. At least I think so. In order to calm a human child, I apparently have to sit on them and I hardly can do that through a door.”

Tobias, through the door, wailed louder at the thought of probably being crushed to death. The collection of trolls then listened to several more things likely being barricaded against the door.

Sighing and pinching his nose bridge, Vendel prayed for patience before stating, “Blinkous, I think you should carefully review your source material for I am certain that human child-rearing does involve crushing their young.”

Another wail escaped the human in the ingredient closet.

“Well, why else would humans call it babysitting if there was no

sitting involved?" grumbled the historian as he waved his hands in front of himself. "Human culture is an endless collection of ambiguities and contradictions. And, listen to him, logic certainly cannot be spoken to the whelp as he is right now. We need to knock the door down."

"And then what?" asked Vendel. "When you break down the door and have him run away through Troll Market like a frightened goose, causing panic among the masses? Do you want trolls terrified and asking why a human is even in the city?"

Standing there, wondering why he was still here, BaaAch added, "Well, we could get a sack first … and stuff him in it."

"A sack? Really. Who are we? Krumpus?" added Blinky as he looked at the other troll in question.

Aaarrrgghh, meanwhile, ignored the bickering of the trolls behind him and apparently the historic benefits of using sacks when dealing with humans. Instead, he reached for the door handle on the storage closet and pulled. The door opened with ease since it was a pull door and not a push door, the pile of junk against the door completely useless as part of it fell towards Aaarrrgghh.

The large troll stood there for a moment surprised before turning his gaze towards the tiny human in the back of the room. The poor thing looked petrified.

Now, Aaarrrgghh knew he wasn't a poet, so he didn't try to sweet talk the human. Instead, he was forward and kind, hoping the human would understand. "Ugghhh, sorry about barricade. My name Aaarrrgghh with three R's. What your name?"

Tobias, crushed up against the wall and under a shelf full of floating oddities, gaped for a moment. So, despite his initial panic, he found himself answering automatically instead of throwing a jar full of floating eyeballs at the massive brute

"Ummm … my name is Tobias … with one S."

Aaarrrgghh nodded in acceptance. "Sounds like good name. You want out of closet? Whole closet might be haunted."

Distrust still present after being chased down by Bular, Toby asked, "And how do I know you aren't an evil troll that just wants to eat my legs?"

Aaarrgghh, not knowing what else to say, merely answered, “Cat is better. Also, jar haunted.”

Toby, having a jar in hand, stalled as he watched the jar full of eyes all turn their gaze towards him. He immediately yipped and dropped the jar, the eyes all bouncing over the floor. He squealed as they all then started rolling toward him. Tobias, feeling he had little choice, tried to jump over each rotating eye as he tripped out of the storage closet.

Of course, in his rush, he knocked over everything he had piled in front of the door, causing Blinky, BaaAch and Vendel to stop arguing and stare. Finally, as if finishing the race, Tobias finally lost his balance and facepalmed the floor… groaning for a moment as a monkey paw and some other questionably cursed items escaped the jars he had just tripped over.

Vendel groaned and covered his face with a paw while Blinky and Kanjigar immediately tried to chase down the escaping cursed or haunted items.

Aaarrrgghh remained though, chuckling for a moment at the scene. He then moved forward as a ghost-scorpion started to run towards the human’s face. He plucked Toby up by the scruff of his costume and placed him on his feet. Toby immediately kicked the scorpion away with a collection of *oh-my-gosh*-es before he turned back to the green troll with wide eyes, a floating eyeball landing on his head like a bird.

Squealing and waving the haunted eyeball away, Toby straightened his spine when he noticed Aaarrrgghh was still watching him. “So … are you the good trolls or are you just tricking me to eat me later?”

“Good trolls. No eat,” said Aaarrrgghh with a nod as Blinky ran behind him, trying to use a jar to catch the monkey paw.

Toby cringed as he watched BaaAch run into Kanjigar while chasing some flying eyeballs. “Uh, sorry about the mess … but, just so you know, if you are lying and eat me, I’m haunting your intestines Aaarrrgghh with three Rs. And never will you enjoy anything cheese covered or deep fried again without cursing my name.”

Chuckling at the strange little human, Aaarrrgghh patted him on the head and decided he liked him … and it was only partially because he smelled like cat.

…

Jim found himself running through Troll Market in a blind haze, dodging through the streets like he belonged there, his head down and his breathing labored. He had made it halfway through the market, part of his mind just screaming to see how far he could run. He was getting closer and closer to the exit. If he could just get home, all would be –

"Ugh!" suddenly cried Jim as some invisible force tugged on his wrist where his new accessory was located, causing him to flop onto his back as if he had just slipped on ice. For a second, he laid there, panting and ignoring the side glances he was getting from the venders nearby.

Forcing himself to his feet, not wanting to cause a panic when they realized he was human, he carefully stepped into an alley to test the band on his arm. It immediately tightened in threat.

Sighing, pulling at his wrist once more, Jim silently accepted that he wasn't getting out of Troll Market. He couldn't even draw a portal anyway, but he still needed … to be alone. He needed to think and panic. Yes, panic was defiantly a must. Maybe a little self-loathing was in order as well.

Taking in a deep breath, hating Vendel for trapping him, Jim quickly looked around for a place to gather himself before one of the venders came over to see what was the matter.

Tripping backward, holding his wrist and the golden band in anger for it was the only reason he wasn't sobbing in terror, he looked up. He immediately noticed the small waterfall that ran through the west side of Troll Market. It should be close enough to the Hearthstone that it wouldn't tug him back, but mostly he knew that no one would hear him … when he ultimately broke down.

He could feel the internal panic rising. It wasn't a lie. He wasn't a lie. Vendel was mistaken. He wasn't a seer.

Running over the bridge, the spray of water hanging in the air like fog as he drew closer to the waterfall, he made his way up the thin path that led to the top of the waterfall. He slipped once or twice on the march up, part of him wondering if this path was technically abandoned, but Jim soon found himself on an overhang near the waterfall's top. He was free from most of its spray, glowing mushrooms and moss glimmering all around him.

Ignoring the sting of his ribs and leg, Jim buried his head in his knees

and gripped the top of his head.

A sob finally escaped him and he immediately chided himself for it. “C-calm down. Vendel’s wrong. I was real. What I felt was real. My friends were real … My love was real … My pain was real.”

And yet his words were dying in his throat, like the very last ember to finally fade away in the ashes. Did it matter if it was real? No one else remembered anything. Maybe all seers thought the way he does now. For all he knew ...

“What if Unkar did this to me … as a punishment for abandoning my responsibility?” asked Jim out loud to himself, feeling tears prickle at the sides of his eyes as he dug his fingernails into his scalp, wanting to feel any other pain then the agony that was blooming in his chest. “Or maybe the amulet never wanted me so … so it made this dream to keep me away and to prove I wasn’t worthy to be the Trollhunter.”

Swallowing, either thought completely distressing, Jim buried his head completely in his knees, unable to face the world. All he wanted was to know he wasn’t wrong for feeling love, hate and sorrow for moments that apparently had never happened.

His voice was barely even a whisper with the waterfall’s roar nearby, his voice finally gathering enough strength to speak. Nonetheless, in a tone of desperation, his questions were pleading. “Unkar … please. Please talk to me. I need to know if what happened was real. I need to know if I was really the Trollhunter?”

Yet, voice barely holding back sobs, Unkar never came forward and never answered Jim’s call. And so, the boy was left alone, his choking sobs drowned out by the sound of falling water crashing against stones.

…

Elsewhere, far from a boy and his sorrow, the night was growing late and the light would soon be returning to the world. Nomura stepped into the loading area of the museum with an icepack in hand, having received a strange text in the middle of the night that read simply: *bring icepack, museum was compromised*.

She looked at the storage area and the mess everywhere, yellow tennis balls rolling about like lost heads. She then turned her irritated gaze to the only culprit there to blame for the mess.

Stepping up to Strickler, the changeling sitting on a large crate as he held his knee, the woman crossed her hands over his chest and gave the green man a look. She purposely kept the icepack out of reaching distance as she waited for an answer. “Well? By compromised do you mean utterly destroyed? It was your evening to watch Bular.”

Strickler frowned at her gaze and quickly defended himself. “I was and I didn’t make this mess, Nomura. So, don’t blame it on me. Two *hooligans* were in here raiding the crates when they saw Bular and myself. Apparently, it was the hooded boy Bular has been obsessed with. So those *interlopers* and Bular made the mess before running off. Not I.”

“Always claiming to be innocent,” grumbled the woman. “One day you will pay for your bad acting, Strickler. Now, where is Bular?”

“I wouldn’t know. He’s probably galivanting around town, being caught on every traffic camera in the area,” groused Strickler, putting out a hand for the icepack.

Nomura gave him a look and turned away without saying anything else, throwing the icepack over her shoulder for the green changeling to catch. She then picked up what looked like an ancient spear, only to sneer a second later as the spear head clattered to the floor. She turned in a rage, snapping the rest of the spear in half.

“Oh, someone will pay,” growled Nomura, her eyes glowing, but before she could turn and blame this all on Strickler, the dock door slid open and a large shadow cast itself over the two figures.

A second later, Bular tromped in, dirt and weeds falling all over the loading dock’s floor. He looked like he had rolled around in a dirt pile, clumps of grass falling all over the cement floor. A second later he shook himself like a grumpy dog, throwing dirt all over the storage area and the two changelings. A hoard of goblins then ran in as well, tracking dirt and clumps of vegetation where they may. A few even dragged lawn ornaments in with them.

Nomura’s eye twitched as she watched the dirt scatter everywhere like a plague. She just knew that she was going to have to clean up that mess as well.

“What happened to you?” finally asked Walter as he iced his knee, shaking dirt off of his head.

Growling as he cracked his neck, Bular said, “I was run over … by

construction equipment! I'll get that hooded whelp if it's the last thing I do. He knows something and I want to know it as well!"

The two changelings then watched him go to the basement under the building, probably to brood.

Walt tried not to sigh, knowing how the next few days would be. "Well, good luck with that brooding pile of mortar. I do not envy you."

Throwing a dented roman helmet at the other changeling's head, Nomura growled, "Don't make me kick you in the other knee, Walter. I may have to deal with his brooding tomorrow, but I'm putting your number on Bular's speed dial."

Strickler cringed. Maybe it had been Nomura that gave that brute a cell phone.

Chapter End Notes

> Well, looks like Aaarrrgghh gets his wingman back … and Jim merely gets to question all that he thinks he knows. Regardless, here's a quick chapter before season three comes out. I can't wait because it will definitely give me more material to work with for this fic.

Like a Disney Princess

Chapter Notes

Added an additional scene to the previous chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It has been hours. We need some answers. Sooner rather than later,” said Kanjigar softly as he watched the pudgy whelp curl up on a bed fur and start to pass out.

Tobias was his name, he believed, and the boy was the seer’s companion. When asked, Tobias had been distant about Jim -the seer- and his visions. He merely explained that Jim had some weird dream, that their teacher was apparently evil wooing machine, and that they went to the museum to get something called a Fetch. He claimed to know little else.

Kanjigar felt the boy knew much more, but Tobias was still fumbling around all the trolls. So, when the whelp had started to wind down and nod off, Kanjigar left the whelp be. It was probably best to ask the seer himself anyway … if the whelp ever showed up again. In fact, he had sent BaaAch and Draal out to sniff the Foresight out. It had felt like hours and it was likely reaching daylight outside. They best have a chat before Seer Jim had to rest.

Then, there was also the nagging worry about the gaggle-tack. Tobias had merely taken it in hand and looked up at all four of them expectantly. He then said he wasn’t very good at horseshoes and that was that. Why a horse would wear such a valuable item was beyond them all.

“I agree,” said Blinky as he walked up to Vendel and Kanjigar, looking down at the trollish notes strewn all over the work-slab. “Have Draal or BaaAch returned? Or shall Aaarrrgghh and myself join the search for Young Jim as well?”

Kanjigar was about to agree, but then noticed the absence of the ex-General. It only took a second of searching until he surprisingly found Aaarrrgghh covering the pudgy human with a sleeping fur. Kanjigar frowned slightly. He had seen this behavior a few times before with other troll-whelps in the market. Aaarrrgghh just had a fatherly and

protective streak to him … to bad Aaarrrgghh couldn't see those qualities in himself. Kanjigar knew that Aaarrrgghh would never forget the sins of his past as a General to Gunmar, but there was a difference in learning from your past mistakes and harboring them close to your heart.

Aaarrrgghh probably didn't think his stone was worthy to help carve out a new life.

Looking away from Aaarrrgghh, not wanting to interrupt the son of the lost Johanna Mmmm (even though Aaarrrgghh never felt worthy to carry the title of a mother he never knew), the Trollhunter merely said, "BaaAch and Draal were raised in Troll Market. I'm sure they know more nooks and crannies than the rest of us. Let them be a bit longer."

And so Kanjigar let the moment hang, silently dwelling on what pacifism really meant to Aaarrrgghh.

…

Draal drew in a deep breath, catching the prophet's scent. He had been catching it on and off for the last hour and it was driving him mad. It was like it was in the very water yet was in the mist and the air at the same time.

"Where is he? We've walked around this side of Troll Market ten times. He is here. He has to be," grumbled Draal, his fists clenching in irritation. Sometimes he wondered where his father got his patience because he sure didn't have it.

BaaAch stepped up next to him, his nose in the air. "Yes, I agree. The waterfall's throwing him off. It's like his scent is in the air … up high."

Immediately, both of them looked upwards towards the top of the waterfall. Their forms were too large nowadays to make the slippery trek upwards to the overhangs, but they remembered when they were young. It had been a refuge from all the work and chores as the adults toiled away to build Troll Market into what it was today. In fact, all whelps seemed to find the overlooks by the waterfall sooner or later. And it was there that most fell in love with Troll Market. For there was never a more perfect sight of the Hearthstone than in the mist of that roaring waterfall.

"Sooo, which one of us wants to fall to our death?" joked BaaAch as he bared all of his teeth in a grin.

Draal sighed, “Of course, he had to crawl up there.”

“Only makes sense,” said BaaAch as he scratched the back of his head, stalling as he found a ghost-scorpion in his hair. He flicked it away as Draal gave him a confused look. “Hardly is there a young whelp that doesn’t find himself up there once in their lives. Your father probably knows the best … since he has to crawl up there at least once a year to fetch one that can’t make the way down by themselves.”

Huffing air out of his nose, the smell of fresh water nearly washing out the prophet’s scent once again, Draal nodded in agreement as he eyed the sword indentations that his father had made to get up there without falling. He had done it so many times that those marks were now like handholds leading up.

“I think you should cross the stream and take the left side up,” commented BaaAch as he puffed the hair out of his eyes again.

Draal sighed in resignation, knowing that there was no point in arguing with BaaAch about who was going up, because BaaAch really needed a haircut or something. So, finding the first handhold, he found himself crawling upward, following the path his father had made as he muttered back, “No, I think I’ll take the right.”

“You’re going to regret it,” jested BaaAch at the base, smiling knowingly.

A few minutes later, Draal pulled himself up onto the first overhang with a grunt, nearly slipping for the fourth time. He quickly looked around at the nearby overhangs that seemed to grow around the waterfall’s top like mushrooms. In fact, some of the overhangs were actual giant mushroom caps. He was instantly greeted by the smell of moss and fungi as well as a spray of cool water. He also caught the scent of the prophet amongst the mix of smells… only to immediately groan and knock his horned head against the damp stone in front of him. There, on the other side of the waterfall, he smelled the whelp and could even see one of his boots.

Grumbling in his chest, the blue troll immediately started crawling down again. BaaAch was already laughing by the time he leaped the last few feet down from the handholds, chuckling about being correct. Draal made sure to punch his sparring partner in the gut as he passed. He then hopped the stones over the river, ignoring the grumble of one of the water-trolls that lived in the water at the waterfall’s base. It was hard to tell with water-trolls what was a rock at the water’s edge and

who wasn't, but Draal didn't dawdle to see who's back he had stepped on.

A few seconds later, BaaAch still laughing even though he was holding his gut, Draal made his way upward. He slipped only once, surprisingly, but otherwise made it to the top of the correct overhang unheeded. He soon found himself towering over the whelp, wondering if anyone would notice if he threw the pain down instead of carrying him.

Surprisingly, the boy didn't seem to notice him at first, his gaze looking elsewhere as if lost and tormented by a thought. Then, as if acknowledging Draal's presence, the prophet closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he released it through his nose and looked up. There wasn't an ounce of fear there, like a human new to troll-kind should be. Instead, it was a sad look, pained and full of regret.

"Hello, Draal. It's good to see you well and … unmarred," said the whelp knowingly, his gaze falling to Draal's right arm.

The sorrowful stare and ominous words immediately set Draal on edge and, despite himself, he immediately rubbed his right arm. Vendel nor the others had gone into great detail about the prophet or his visions, but there was definitely magic at play here. So, not knowing what else to say, Draal merely returned the salutation. "Greetings, Young Prophet. I am Draal, son of Kanjigar."

The boy smiled mournfully and stated simply, "I know."

That completely unnerved Draal. He was not used to the magically gifted. True, magic could technically be learned, but magically endowed beings were rare having almost completely faded from the surface lands. That was probably why humans no longer believed in magic … especially humans *with* magic. Which was probably one of the reasons why Vendel and his father seemed fit on grabbing the prophet as quickly as possible. They didn't need the changelings or Bular getting ahold of such a gift.

"And don't you mean s*eer* and not *prophet*? At least that's what Vendel seems set on calling me," said the whelp almost bitterly, looking away from Draal as he pulled his knees in closer to his chest.

Lip twitching into an uncertain grimace, unsure of how to deal with the whelp's sulking, Draal finally sighed and flopped down next to the human. The impact nearly made the boy bounce. Nonetheless, they both just sat awkwardly next to each other with Draal opening and

then closing his mouth a few times like he was trying out different words.

Finally, Draal admitted, “I do not know what Vendel has said to you, Prophet. That is between he and you. I was merely sent to fetch you. The others have need of your gift … but I can tell you need a moment more to yourself and you could not have picked a better place. Even I came to these falls to think when I was young and my horns weren’t fully grown in.”

Shifting awkwardly, unused to this Draal that wanted to speak with him instead of training him into the ground, Jim sagged slightly, “It’s not the same for me … thinking will do nothing for my situation. It can’t prove to anyone that my memories are real. In fact, Vendel just called all my memories visions, but it was real to me… It *was* real.”

Draal’s face scrunched up and Jim couldn’t help but notice that the troll glanced at the edge of the overhang for a moment as if wondering if it would be easier to jump than to have a heart to heart moment. In the end, rubbing his right arm as if to rid Jim’s gaze from it, Draal said uncertainly, “I … understand your frustration.”

Jim gave him a dull look and asked somewhat sarcastically, “So you understand my huge existential crisis in the few words that we have spoken to each other? Draal, I am questioning the very memories that make me, *me*, and if I’ve always been a seer or not. I think we need more than an awkward heart to heart to get that kind of understanding.”

“Well,” said Draal as he rose to his feet, struggling to find the right words. “Perhaps next time then, but for now I can say that it’s not uncommon for anyone to question themselves, seer or not. I understand that feeling well for I came up here lost many years ago. I questioned who everyone wanted me to be and who I wanted to be. In the end, I made my decisions.”

Jim’s shoulder’s sagged, glad for Draal’s advice and yet lost because it wasn’t *his* Draal saying it. “It’s not the same as making a life decision. Everything has already changed. Just like you. You are the same … yet you aren’t. You’re less angry and murderous and …”

The prophet went silent for a moment as he stared at his hands, his right hand seeming to enclose around nothing before he sighed and softly muttered, “… Never mind. I’m not making any sense and I shouldn’t burden you with what *apparently* never was. Just … take me

back. I'll tell them what I can and then go home. It's not like it's my responsibility to fight Bular."

Draal raised a stony brow, wondering how he had been more *murderous* to the whelp, but he was already very uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation so he let it slide. It was unsettling how the boy spoke to him anyway as if they had known each other for years. It was just so uncanny. Was this how prophets always were?

Nonetheless, Draal tried to speak kindly to the seer for he was the reason the blue troll had more time with his father. "I'm sure your worries will make sense in time, Prophet. Now, let us be off. Kanjigar the Courageous, my father, and Vendel wish to speak with you."

Sighing, knowing that he had made this choice to no longer be Trollhunter and that this dilemma was now his punishment, Jim decided to power through this. He would help Kanjigar where he could without rushing the timeline too much so everything wasn't completely unpredictable, and then he would go home. That's what he had wanted in the end, right? To not be the chosen one?

"Okay, fine. I'm done moping for now. Let's just get this over with," said Jim as he headed towards the thin and slippery path that had led him upward only to stall when Draal suddenly put an arm in front of him, stalling him.

"And where do you think you are going, Prophet?" asked Draal, brow creasing.

"Ugh, down," replied Jim simply as he pointed downward. "And its Jim. Not Prophet. That's not my name."

Nodding, Draal said, "I understand, Prophet Jim, but humans are … squishy. I cannot let you go down that way. Your leg his obviously injured and it is harder getting down that path than up."

Eye twitching at his new title, Jim asked, "And how will I be getting down then? I don't exactly have a grappling hook with this costume."

The smirk that covered Draal's face immediately made Jim regret his words.

"I thought you would never ask. Now hold tight, Prophet Jim," said the troll and with that he threw Jim over his shoulder in a fireman carry and jumped off the edge of the outcropping. Jim screamed the

whole way down even as Draal grabbed handholds and slick stone walls to slow their descent. In the end, Jim's gut took most of the jarring abuse. So BaaAch and Draal were both stuck awkwardly patting him on the back as he threw up in the river.

…

A few minutes later, his mouth now full of bile and his entire form feeling battered and abused, Jim found himself in a stone chair before the trolls. He was officially greeting Kanjigar the Courageous in the flesh. It was disquieting seeing the armor on someone else, but it was even more unnerving to speak with Kanjigar in this way. Kanjigar had been different as a spirit, somewhat professionally distant and yet obviously upset with the amulet's choice in successors. There was still that knightly professional grace in the way the blue troll held himself, but Kanjigar also seemed … warmer somehow. Alive was probably the right word for it.

"Greets, Young Foresight. I am the Trollhunter, Kanjigar the Courageous, Son of Tal. My companions are Elder Vendel, Son of Rundel, Son of Kilfred; and our resident historian and trainer, Blinkous Galadrigal, Son of Ulus," said Kanjigar neutrally as he brought a curled fist up to his chest, bowing his head slightly. Jim knew it was a sign of respect of some kind. Something traditional, probably, that he had yet to learn in his … not-life.

Jim swallowed a lump in his throat and did an awkward head-bow back, his tongue heavy in his mouth. "Greetings Kanjigar, Son of Tal. Greetings Elder Vendel. Greetings Trainer Blinky-B-Blinkous. I am Jim, Son of Barbara."

Blinky opened his mouth, as if to confirm he would rather be called Blinky, but Kanjigar nodded and spoke first, "Hello, Jim, Son of Bar-ba-ra. It is nice to officially be introduced … though you could have saved us a lot of trouble by merely speaking with me the morning we met. It would have saved us both much confusion and heartache."

And there it was … lecturing-mode Kanjigar. He almost missed it.

Almost.

Swallowing the bitter feeling of failure, Jim couldn't find the energy in him to disagree with his predecessor. Instead, he muttered, "We were never supposed to meet again, Kanjigar. That is why I left after giving my three warnings. And honestly … there isn't much else to say."

Frowning at Jim's underwhelming tone, the blue troll sat down on the other side of the stone table, his gauntlets making a soft clank as they met stone. He really looked at Jim for a moment, noting how the boy looked exhausted with his sunken eyes and messy hair. He was also young. In fact, he was just too young even for a human whelp to be burdened with any form of foresight.

Vendel had told both Blinkous and himself to speak calmly when addressing the seer because seers were … unbalanced. Never had one survived long in the world as they were driven into battle and suicidal plans to fulfill a life they had never lived. They believed they had skills or magic they never learned, apparently. Most seers died trying to stall or fulfill their vision-life.

It had been a stroke of pure luck that the trolls had happened upon Jim before he got himself killed by Bular. Kanjigar wasn't about to let the whelp do something so foolish again. In the absence of other magic folk to guide and watch over the seer, he supposed that responsibility fell to the closest magical beings in Arcadia: the trolls.

"I understand that having foresight is difficult, Young Jim, but your companion reveals otherwise. Apparently, you sought out a Fetch at the Arcadia Museum tonight because of a vision, did you not? And I don't recall any of your warnings mentioning a Fetch that had to be retrieved."

Eyes going wide in realization, Jim hurriedly asked, "Wait … friend? Is Toby here? I thought I heard him but ... Is he okay?"

"Tobias, Grandson of Nana, is fine, but Young Jim, you must understand that at this revelation and the fact that you seemed to know Vendel before meeting him, I must question the validity of your prophecies," said Kanjigar carefully, watching the boy squeeze the wrist that had the boundary-band on it in irritation. "Were the words you told me imparted to you by an otherworldly voice or was it a vision of some kind, like another life, that you created them from? Vendel says it's important that we know because different types of foresight can-"

"My life was not a dream!" finally defended Jim, his voice nearly breaking. "My suffering was real! My feelings were *real*!"

Kanjigar was at first surprised with the outburst and where his words faltered, Vendel was quick to interject, "And yet you seem to want that suffering to repeat itself, do you not Young Seer? False prophecies

will only cause more heartache than good. So why make them?"

Jim, disliking the feeling of being ganged up on, threw a pleading look to Blinky who had yet to speak. Blinky merely gave a sympathetic look but didn't interpose with Vendel like he used to. He knew that made sense … this Blinky didn't know him yet. He wasn't quite Jim's Blinky just like Draal wasn't quite Jim's Draal.

Would any of the trolls ever be Jim's trolls again?

Tugging at the wristband, Jim tried to defend himself but his mind felt muddled and troubled, and he just …

"They aren't false!" finally barked Jim, jumping to his feet as his hands slammed onto the stone table, scattering the papers there. "I just … couldn't do nothing, yet I just can't tell you everything. You wouldn't have believed me and even if you had, you would have moved too fast in the timeline and messed everything up! So I decided to give you a warning, a clue. So my prophecies are real! And I will tell you what I feel you should know when and nothing more!"

He was panting by the time he finished, expecting some kind of backlash, but surprisingly Vendel sat there calm and collected even though Blinky looked highly uncomfortable. Kanjigar just seemed disturbed.

Finally, the elder troll rose to his feet, leaning on his staff, "Your will is understood, Young Seer. So, since we must wait for you to impart us with another prophecy, I do hope you enjoy the hospitalities of Troll Market and our Trollhunter. The day will soon be upon us so the city guard will show you to your dwell for the day."

And with that, Vendel bowed his horned head slightly and left.

Jim, standing there, was confused for a moment as Kanjigar rose with a sigh of acceptance as well, the large troll waving a hand towards the exit where two red trolls suddenly perked up. The two came forward, looking confused as to why there was a human there yet both still awaited directions.

"Klaam. Guuk. You both are tasked with taking Seer Jim, Son of Bar-ba-ra, to his assigned dwell and watching him and his companion for the day. Call on myself or one of the Trollhunter trainers if there is truly a problem. Jim, these are two of Troll Market's best city guards. If you need anything, *within reason*," he stressed, "please ask them. I need my rest since I apparently have a Fetch to collect when the

evening comes."

With that, Jim was apparently going to be left in the care of two strange trolls, but the boy quickly interrupted, "Wait … that's it? You aren't going to make me tell you what I know?"

Blinky was finally the one to speak as he placed a notepad back into his satchel. "Young Seer, as a human I'm sure you are not informed, but a true foretelling can never be forced from a being with Foresight. Such beings have a subtle magic that protects their mind. Plus, everyone knows to force an admittance is to invite mistruths."

Jim stared at Blinky almost in shock so the historian continued, "I hope you will impart more information to us soon, but we cannot force you. So, until then, rest well Young Seer."

Still standing there, feeling almost like this was a weird nightmare, Jim looked up to Kanjigar for confirmation. The current Trollhunter merely raised a stony brow and agreed, "As Blinky said, seers have a subtle magic to them. We cannot force you to speak. So, until then, a dwell has been prepared for you and your companion."

Now frowning up at Kanjigar, the situation finally setting in, Jim asked, "A dwell? As in a house down here in Troll Market? But I need to go home, especially if the sun is going to rise soon. My mom will notice I'm missing."

At this, Kanjigar merely nodded in agreement, "As a mother, I'm sure she will notice your absence, but as a seer, your protection falls onto me. And there is no place safer than Troll Market, Young Jim. Perhaps, in time, I can allow you to return to your domicile above ground, but for now … your place is where I can keep an eye on you."

Jim could only gape in horror.

"Y-you can't do that? He can't do that right?" added Jim as he looked at his two guards; both merely gave him a shrug before the teen looked back at Kanjigar. "Listen here. I'm *not* some Disney Princess that can be locked away. I don't even have the hair or the animal companion for that kind of gig."

Kanjigar gave Jim a confused look.

"Bad analogy," confessed Jim, his mind subtly wondering if he would get a gnome as an animal companion if he did become a Disney Princess, "but people will notice when Toby and I don't show back up.

Kids just don't disappear."

Stepping closer, huffing hot air out of his nose and onto Jim, the large troll asked simply, "Have you ever heard of the Milk Carton Epidemic?"

Frowning but refusing to take a step back even as the blue troll invaded his personal space, Jim admitted, "No, I haven't."

Hot air spilling over Jim again, Kanjigar stated, "Exactly. I do not wish to sound cruel, Young Jim, but human children go missing every day. And, being magically endowed as you are, you belong far more to this world down here than above the ground where it was all but banished. Now, rest well. I will talk to you more in the coming days."

And with that, Kanjigar stepped away, leaving Jim with his two market-guards … and completely horrified. Truthfully, in the back of his mind, he understood that Kanjigar was right. If Jim was caught by Bular or the changelings, it would be disastrous knowing what he knows. But, the very thought of never returning to his mother encompassed all other thoughts. It was like he had just discovered he was drowning and the surface was just too high up.

Chapter End Notes

> Well, after watching season three, I realized Draal is a lot older than I thought he was, but I still like the idea of him growing up in Troll Market especially given his immature attitude at times. Also … I love how badly he handled the Jim-bonding. I also wanted to touch on the troll-Dad theme a bit with Tobes. And its totally head cannon for me that Johanna Mmmm -from the book- is Aaarrrgghh's mother. It would make sense that Gunmar would steal Aaarrrgghh as a child if only in defiance of Johanna. As for Jim's new crib … Well, its probably better than being a changeling prisoner and at least Kanjigar means well. ^.^;
>
> Also, Princess Jim is best Disney Princess. XD

Klutz Quota

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hour was late and the stars hung low, like twinkling little memories threatening to fall into the darkness and be forgotten forever.

Most people in the Arcadia Oaks were deep under their covers and asleep, their minds whimsically throwing together idle thoughts in a recipe for glee or disaster. Eli Pepperjack was not one of those people. He just couldn't make his mind *stop*. In fact, he currently had his face buried in his sheets and his butt up in the air as if trying to force more blood flow to his head so he could just reach a conclusion and go to bed.

It was just a theory board after all … staring at him from across the room like a web of lies. Ugh, why did Arcadia Oaks have to be so weird? It wasn't like Eli sought out the supernatural. It just kind of fell into his lap and no one else wanted to see it. So, apparently, it was up to him to find out the truth … but did it really have to keep him awake at night?

Sighing into his sheets, Eli was suddenly jerked from his thoughts when what sounded like a roar echoed outside, the glass panes of his window shaking faintly. For a second his mind asked what kind of dinosaur it was and how it had been recreated in present day (and did he really have space on his theory board for it), when he heard what was obviously squealing and the sound of a bike chain.

It was a sound he knew all too well ... Was someone going to bike by and egg his house again?

Straightening his glasses, readying himself to get up and peer out the window, Eli barely had time to watch a bike with two figures flash by … And boy were their Gun-Robot cosplays fantastic as their buckles and goggles glinted in the lamplight. In fact, indulging in his own fan-boy glee for a moment, Eli even noted that both costumes were obviously lesser known Gun-Robot villains from season two. Plus, if that alone wasn't odd enough for nearly two in the morning, both cosplayers were struggling to hold onto one bike while throwing pink flamingos backward.

Fully awake now, Eli was about to question why there were two cosplayers biking by when he felt the floor jiggle and the storm pane shake like they were about to have an earthquake. A second later, the two boys on the bike having passed like a fleeting fan-dream, something like a charcoal black D&D monster pounded by, his jowls dripping while his teeth showed off how sharp they were. And if that wasn't enough, the great monster was joined with a parade of angry, frog-like creatures that were attacking and serenading the flamingos being thrown at them.

Eli barely had time to cry 'awesome' when suddenly there was another gap … and then a huge blue bull-guy dressed in glowing armor ran by, followed with a green and fuzzy titan, a spiky turquoise orc-creature, and a monster with too many eyes. The teenager almost forgot to breathe yet, somehow, he managed to stumble to the window and plaster his cheek to the glass so he could look around the corner. He then watched the glowing armor disappearing into the new housing district.

Pulling away from the window while leaving an imprint of his face, Eli whispered to himself, "I knew trolls were real."

A pair of shoes later, he was opening his window and falling out into the flower garden with the huff. Eli was quick to his feet and straightening his glasses while a camera swung around his neck.

"Alright, time for the truth," said the boy to himself as he ran forward into the darkness … promptly tripping on a hose in the yard and facepalming into the dirt. "I'm okay."

A few seconds later, the taste of grass between his teeth, Eli was stalking the new housing district. He knew that it was against building regulations to enter such an area without a hard hat, but the truth was out there ... or right down the street if you had to be specific about it.

Running through a backyard with newly placed turf, Eli squeaked again as fell into a hole … the size of himself.

Groaning, the boy rolled over and lay there a moment wondering how many times he had to trip tonight before he met his klutz quota. Sitting up, he immediately stilled when he noticed that he was kneeling in what looked like a tread mark of … spikes? And were those footprints … the size of his skull?

Before he knew what he was doing, the youth was following the tracks and wishing he had the foresight to bring plaster with him.

Nonetheless, he followed the spiky indents and footprints with the sparse light offered by the few lights in the forming neighborhood. Soon, he was weaving around what looked like a scuffle, dirt thrown everywhere, a fishpond missing half of its fish and … *squish*.

The thin boy stalled and looked down with a frown, having stepped in something gooey. Tilting his head, seeing that it was a green pile of goo … he quickly realized that it was a green smear with *spindly arms* and *legs*. In fact, it was the exact same green as the frog-like creatures he had just seen run pass his house.

Gasping in disgust, Eli hopped out of the green remains. But that proved it, he was following the scuff-marks of a battle. What was happening here and how were they related to aliens?

Readying himself to take a photo, Eli stalled when he heard the roar of heavy machinery along with a pained bark into the night.

“Not that switch you brainless fools! Are you trying to crush me!”

“Waka! Waka!”

“I don’t care if you don’t have this ‘*driver’s permit’*! Get this human contraption off of me!”

Coming from behind a partially completed house, Eli’s eyes widen when he turned his attention across the road and to a partially constructed house. For a moment he didn’t trust his eyes because it looked like the large black troll from early … and he was currently pinned by construction equipment against the beginnings of a fireplace, a small army of green gremlin creatures pulling at levers on the caterpillar.

Jaw dropping, he immediately brought up his camera to take a few photos. This was it! The proof he needed and – *flash* –

Oh, boy.

He had forgotten to turn off the flash off, didn't he?

Eli gasped and the gremlin-creatures stalled and hissed, one of them accidentally knocking the vehicle in gear as they all turned to face him. Bular barely had time to wonder where the flash had come from before the caterpillar was roaring forward, over him, the fireplace, and finally through the house. It then powered itself down a hill with a volley of goblins still attached to it, screaming as they disappeared

over the ridge.

Bular, grunting out a breath, barely even had time to sit up before the framework of the house started to wobble.

“Oh, no. Oh, no! Oh, no!” cried Bular as he threw an arm up to protect himself, the wooden frame coming down in a roar of wood and plastic.

The teenager, having fought with the camera to turn off the flash, stood there for a moment in surprise as the dust settled. Had that really just happened? Part of him was glad while the other part was now wondering what he was supposed to do? Should he see if the black troll was alive or book it?

Biting his lip in indecision, an angry roar finally echoed over the expanse and a black fist punched its way out of the rubble like a deranged daisy. A second later the large troll was pulling himself out of the rubble, his glowing eyes immediately snapping in Eli’s direction.

Squeaking, Eli quickly dived into some nearby construction material just praying that he hadn’t been seen. It was a tight squeeze, but he was used to tight places. He even had a small gap to see what was happening … though he quickly wished he couldn’t as the large black troll looked away from his direction and growled, “I’d crush all of you if we had the time! Idiot goblins. Now see where that flash came from … I wouldn’t mind a *snack* to regather my strength.”

Covering his mouth to keep from squeaking, Eli’s eyes widened as he watched half a dozen goblins pop out of the house’s ruins and turn their glowing eyes in his direction.

Nope. *Nope*. Whole bunch of nope!

There was no way this was really happening. S-should he run anyway?! Well, that was laughable. If Steve had taught him anything, it was that he was a terrible sprinter. Should he just stay very still then? Maybe they wouldn’t see him? Then again, that troll creature had a very big nose so they must have a great sense of smell.

Terror running through him, part of his young mind wondering if he had enough time to text his mom goodbye, Eli watched the goblins slowly stalk toward his hiding place like a pack of feral cats. The black troll, meanwhile, merely stood there like a sentry just waiting to pounce once Eli was scared out of his hiding place.

Yet, before the goblins could finish crossing the street to his side of the cul-de-sac, there was a flicker of red and blue lights, the woot-woot of a police enforcer's siren sending a warning throughout the area. The goblins all hissed and scattered like cockroaches from the light. The Gumm Gumm, in turn, merely growled before disappearing into the darkness as well, the cop car pulling to a halt before the destroyed frame of the house.

Badge glinting the flickering lights, Sergeant Ben Gulager stepped out of his car with his flashlight. He waved it around the area and immediately looked at the house's ruins. He muttering something about teenagers as he jogged after the slow-moving construction equipment over the hill, the roar of the caterpillar's engine dying a second later.

For a moment there was silence, Sergeant Gulager coming back to the construction site. He then called out, asking if anyone was hurt.

Eli wanted to call out and have Sergeant Gulager scold him and take him home, like when he was seven. But there he remained, unable to move or breathe. He didn't know why he did it, but part of him believed that if he called out, the black troll would return … and he wouldn't forgive himself if something happened to good old Sergeant Gulager.

So, there he remained, his limbs shaking and his mind numb until the police cruiser finally pulled away.

Yet, even in retreat, Eli had to trip one more time when heading home. After all, he had to fulfill his klutz quota for the evening. Unfortunately, even in the dim light, he could tell it was the two cosplayer's bike, and it was mangled almost beyond all recognition.

…

Despite the terror of the night before, morning came like any other day. The sun crept over Arcadia Oaks like a golden tide, glinting off the dew in the grass and blinding the morning commuters.

In fact, it was a normal morning for most people, except for Eli Pepperjack. He still couldn't believe he was alive from the night before … and it that had really happened. He still had to develop his film in the school's red room just to prove to himself that he wasn't crazy. And even then, could he show anyone or would everyone stop calling him a nerd and crazy instead.

Ugh, the life of a smart kid was hard.

“So please read pages 127 through 156, because there might be a short quiz about it tomorrow,” said Mr. Strickler with a ghost of a smile, basically telling his students that ‘yes, there will be a quiz tomorrow unless I’m feeling particularly cheeky about it’.

Eli, like everyone else in the classroom, groaned.

“Yes, yes, the horrors of being young and having few responsibilities but daily chores and reading assignments,” said Walter. “Now, who has been assigned to collect homework for Mr. Lake and Mr. Domzalski today?”

As if finally noticing that two periods had gone by and two of their fellow students were missing, everyone stared where Jim and Toby usually sat. Mr. Strickler, as if disturbed by the rest of the classes reaction, came from behind his desk. His usual graceful gait was ruin by a slight limp and a knee brace.

“Didn’t anyone call in for either one today?” said the man with a frown, knowing that either the student president or some other unlucky soul would be tasked with collecting the missing student’s homework.

Claire was finally the one to answer. “Um, no. I haven’t seen either one all day.”

Mr. Strickler merely frowned before nodding, the bell going off a second later.

Eli, beside himself, couldn’t help but linger for a moment as he watched Mr. Strickler stare at the two empty desks. Though Mr. Strickler was probably worried for entirely different reasons, Pepperjack couldn't think of anything else but the destroyed bike he tripped over the night before and the two cosplayers that had rode it in front of a parade of monsters.

Now, thinking of it, the two forms had seemed terribly familiar. And with that thought, the dread set in. Eli almost hoped the photo came out blank if only to prove that last night had been a dream and nothing more.

…

It had only taken two hours, only *two*, since Mr. Strickler had called

Jim's mom and asked if he was out sick. She had gone home immediately to either scold or care for her son. He wasn't there, yet his wallet was at home … but his bike was missing. It was another twenty minutes later that Mrs. Lake inquired with Tobias' grandmother to see if Toby knew. It was then noted that Toby was absent as well, his wallet still on his nightstand while his bike was missing. It was another half hour later that Mrs. Lake called the police, terrified that *something* had taken the children. She was immediately panicked thinking it had something to do with a car accident she had days ago.

First, they tried to track the boy's cell phone and apparently, the two devices had just suddenly stopped receiving sometime in the middle of the night.

Then, Jim's bike was found in an alley downtown near the museum … and shortly after, they found Tobias mangled one in the new housing area. There was obviously a struggle of some kind and even trace amounts of blood in the area. Since they were both minors and that Sergeant Ben Gulager had this thing about missing kids (an obsession that stemmed from a cold case from the seventies that involved a whole bunch of missing kids), an Amber Alert was sent out.

And then a slow panic set in.

It was barely palpable at first to the normal student body that anything was amiss. Most kids simply ignored the emergency service alert that popped up on everyone's phone. The teachers' whispers amongst each other and their worried glances did stir a slight reaction as they murmured their dreadful worries to each other in-between classes:

"Isn't this how it started in the seventies? It was two boys. Brothers, I believe."

Claire stalled at her locker and tried to listen, her upset at play practice being canceled taking on a new biter flavor.

"Milk Carton Epidemic, you say? I wasn't aware that such a thing had happened here, but whoever did that would have to be well into their seventies at least …"

Mary Wang slowed her pace as she walked past the teacher's lounge and actually looked up from her phone.

"I heard the school almost shut down because so many kids went missing

during the epidemic as they called it. A lot of families even moved. Only in the last twenty years have new families moved in …"

Darci stalled for a moment and looked up at the graduating classes on the passing wall. The seventies had been sparse of graduating bodies. She didn't think classes could be that small.

"They probably just got lost, right? I mean a lot of homeless people and hikers wander into the woods and go missing around here. And that new housing area is near the woods ..."

Steve stalled when exiting the locker room, wondering if he misheard, only to have Coach give him a worried look and shut his door. Coach … never shut his door.

"Apparently, only one of those missing kids was ever found. They said one femur was found as well though … with … teeth marks in it. Like some bear or something had gotten to her …"

Eli swallowed and held his folder closer as he exited the red-room, having developed the photo during lunch. He wasn't hungry anymore.

…

The end of the school day had finally come like slow crawl and Eli found himself rooted in the middle of the courtyard, the student body surging past him and to freedom while he clutched the folder with *the photo* close to his chest. He couldn't look up. He couldn't stare across the street at the two police cars there. He couldn't watch Jim's mother desperately glance between the children leaving as she looked frantically for her own son.

The police were probably all hoping that the whole incident was just a ruse and that the boys had merely played hooky. He couldn't watch her face morph into sorrow when fewer and fewer students streamed out.

She wasn't going to find Jim here. Eli knew because he now understood who the two boys on the bike were … but would anyone else believe him?

"Is that Jim's mom?" suddenly came a voice next to him, a small group standing a few feet to his left. Out of the corner of his eye, Eli saw that it was Claire Nunez, Mary Wong, and Darci Scott.

"Yeah … I can't watch," said Mary, turning to her phone as if to

ignore the situation.

Darci nodded in agreement, though she was unable to look away as Barbara slowly broke down into tears in the distance. Surprisingly, it was Mr. Strickler that came up and gave her a shoulder to cry on. “I can’t believe this is happening. I mean, what kind of person would take Jim and Toby?”

Eli, unable to keep quiet, wanting to tell at least one soul, found himself whispering out loud, “Who said it was a person.”

The three girls, hearing him mutter, all turned to him with questioned expressions, “What?”

“N-nothing,” said Eli quickly, trying to downplay what he had just said.

Claire had felt this soft connection with Jim when they spoke during play practice. It was like he knew her. She had wanted to get to know him better after that … and then this happens. In her mind, she was already volunteering for search parties if they found out the two teens had gotten lost in the woods and not kidnapped as the rumors were saying.

“No, it’s not nothing. You’ve been strangely quiet all day Eli, even before everyone found out about Jim and Toby,” said Claire sternly before her eyes widened in realization. “Wait. Do you … do you know something about Jim and Toby?”

Eli looked at her, his eyes wide and almost terrified before he stuttered, “What? No!"

"Eli," continued Claire, "Even if it seems unimportant, the teachers said report-'"

"No one would believe me, okay," said the usually kind boy, obviously done with the conversation.

He then turned as if to leave when he suddenly slammed right into another human being. His folder was immediately knocked from his hands like freed birds, photos flying everywhere.

Steve, the other participant in the collision, looked offended but before he could even say buttsnack, the girls all gasped as the photo of Bular in the construction site fluttered to the ground.

“What is that ugly thing?” immediately asked Mary as she took a picture with her own phone. “It looks like a bear had a baby with a goat.”

"And isn't that the house that was knocked down last night? The one where they found Toby's bike," said Darci, having heard the rumors like everyone else.

Eli, slightly calmed that he wasn't alone with this knowledge now, picked up a copy of the photo that just focused on Bular’s terrifying gaze. He then allowed the four other teenagers to peer over his shoulder as he admitted the truth, “That thing is what got Jim and Toby last night at the construction site … or it at least it was one of the trolls chasing them last night. So … who wants to see my theory board?”

Chapter End Notes

> I felt really bad about doing that to Barbara . I just want her to Rambo-up, kick the entrance of Troll Market down and beat Kanjigar with a shovel until he gives Jim back. Alas, Strickler swoops in for the save. He’s such a smooth criminal. >.>
>
> Anyway, the school crew is now dragged into the drama. It was bound to happen. Also, a lot of homage to the original book happened here with the Milk Carton Epidemic (though I had it placed it in the seventies). I may say later what that was all about since it wasn’t Gunmar in this case that ate all the kids. Also, for some reason, I felt like I was writing an homage to ‘It’ more than ‘Trollhunter’ with this update. ^.^;

Steve's Angels … and Eli

There they stood, five teenagers crowded into a room while four of them stared at one of the bedroom walls in varying degrees of curiosity and confusion. Eli stood to the side, wringing his hands together like a fretful artist having their first completed project critiqued.

Darci was the first to speak, "Well, it's really … organized?"

Steve rolled his eyes, "I drove all the way here with you on my scooter for this butt snack? Show me your freezer, because I'm stuffing you in it."

"Oh, can I have your Wi-Fi password before Steve does that?" interjected Mary.

Claire stepped on Steve's foot for his comment and stated, "Well, I can see where you are going with all this Eli, especially with the trolls and the wizards, but what do aliens have to do with this?"

Eli opened his hands and said in an excited tone, "That's exactly it. I don't know how they are involved, but they are … For all I know, it could just be Arcadia Oaks that interconnects them all as some kind of supernatural powerhouse, but they are connected."

Eyes staring at the dark troll in the picture again, Claire asked simply, "But why were Jim and Toby there at the construction site … with that thing?"

Eli, diving behind his bed for cover before Steve could make a grab for him, his head popping up behind the bed like a groundhog a second later, could only shrug.

"Well, I don't know. All I can tell you is that Toby and Jim likely started downtown since Jim's bike was found there. Then, last night at about two in the morning, I watched who I believe were Jim and Toby bike by in cosplay followed by this black troll, a group of goblins and a few blue trolls. By the time I got outside, the blue trolls were gone and so were Jim and Toby. But the black troll was still in the construction site, pinned by some construction equipment. I took that picture … and then he threatened to eat me," finished Eli, still excited despite the threat of death.

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Mary as she pulled away from the photo of Bular. “Why were they wearing cosplay?"

"It sounds geekish. We should leave them to die for the betterment of humanity," commented Steve.

"Cosplay? Did you two not hear the 'threatened to eat me' part of that?" interjected Claire.

“Did he eat Jim and Toby?” worriedly asked Darci as she pulled away from the board as well.

Eli frowned and answered truthfully, “I don’t think so. I honestly don’t know anything right now, or why Jim and Toby were involved, but I do know that I am going to find out.”

“Wait,” said Steven. “Noodle-arm you, is going to find out? You don’t have the upper body strength. Also, there is a cop car down the street. Why aren’t we telling them what happened instead?”

Rolling his eyes, Eli squeaked and crawled over his bed before Steve could make another grab for him, “And have them destroy the evidence? Everyone knows the government knows about these things. The moment they figure out magical beings are involved, the faster they say Jim and Toby are dead and close the case. We need to do this on our own or they both will end up like all those kids in the Milk Carton epidemic.”

Claire, getting more and more ruffled with the situation, asked, “Milk Carton Epidemic? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Exactly,” squeaked Eli as he pointed to an old newspaper clipping he had found. “Everyone wanted it forgotten because they couldn’t explain it. So, right now, it’s only us five that know the truth and I ask you ‘will you help me?’ … Because we are the only rescue party coming for Jim and Toby right now.”

Looking at each other, each and everyone slightly freaked out with what Eli was saying, Claire was the first to stand up straight and proclaim, “Of course, we will. We’ll find these creeps and get Jim and Toby back home.”

Darci quickly nodded, “Yeah! No one messes with the girls … uh, and guys … of Arcadia Oaks High!”

"Yeah! I have a new camera phone waiting to be used," said Mary

unhelpfully.

“Okay. We’ll hunt these trolls or we aren't Steve’s Angels … and Eli, I guess!” agreed Steve, only to have everyone immediately glare at him. “What? our group needs a name. And since there are three chicks in it, I figured …”

“*No*,” agreed the girls unanimously, Darci throwing a pillow from Eli's bed. "We are not doing that."

Eli, perking up again, raised his hand like they were all in school and made a suggestion, “How about Creepslayerz, with a Z! It’s vague enough that we can say it’s a video game guild or something and no one will question it.”

The girls still didn’t look terribly impressed, but Darci shrugged, “Well, it’s better than Steve’s Angels. So, where do we start? Like you said, we’re going to have to be the rescue team here. We better start now.”

Nodding, Eli looked at Darci and the girls, “Well, your dad’s a detective or something, isn’t he Darci?”

Brow raising, the girl warily said, “Yeahhh.”

“Great. So, you might be able to get more information on whatever the police found on Jim and Toby … as well as the Milk Carton epidemic. I have a feeling that they are connected, if not ready to be repeated,” said Eli carefully, wondering if the girls were up to the task.

Darci, though, seemed ready for the challenge. “We are on it. Dad won’t suspect a thing, but what will you two be doing?”

“Following the tracks back. Maybe we can find out where Jim and Toby came from … or maybe where they have gone,” said Eli as he grabbed a helmet with a flashlight on it.

“Wait? What?” said Steve as everyone started separating for their assigned tasks. “Why do we get stuck stalking the people eating monster while Darci just has to suck up to her dad?”

…

Detective Scott sighed and rubbed his eyes, staring at the board before him with its pictures of two boys, two bikes, a ruined construction site

… and sparse traces of blood at said construction site. It wasn't enough to call in the cadaver dogs, but it settled in Scott's bones like a heavy weight … especially with the way Officer Gulager stated, '*This was just how the Milk Carton Epidemic started. Two boys and two bikes, the bike spokes still spinning … we only got one boy back.*'

Personally, he had moved to Arcadia with his wife years ago so that their family could be safe. That way their little girl wouldn't grow up in a city at an overpopulated and violent school. He wanted the best for her. In a nice community that wasn't overpriced. Arcadia wasn't a small town but not really a city either. It was a good place. At least he thought it was. Now, looking at the file Gulager had kept as a personal reminder, he knew he should have looked back further. Arcadia had skeletons.

Then again, these kidnappings happened in the seventies. There was no way the original perpetrator was still alive … unless his prodigy was.

Scott sighed and covered his face. No, he couldn't deal with that now. Gulager's cold case was obviously affecting his judgment. The two cases likely didn't have any connections besides location. Unfortunately, two kids had gone missing and given how the homeless population in Arcadia always seemed to wander into the woods and disappear, he wouldn't be surprised if the same thing happened here. The blood was troubling though … and why were the bikes in two locations? And what was with the plastic gun, tennis balls, and destroyed gardens between the two locations?

Okay, he'd agree with what everyone said: Arcadia was weird.

But there wasn't time for that. He had two boys to find. Maybe a search through the nearby woods? A search party had to be thrown together now though if that was the case, before night settled.

Turning around, the tall man nearly tripped over himself when he noticed three girls standing behind him, smiling awkwardly. It was the kind of grin Darci used when she broke something. Despite his rush, Detective Scott folded his arms over his chest and looked at his daughter.

"Daughter, you seem suspicious? Is it the car?" he asked almost jokingly, raising a brow in accusation.

"Dad," said Darci, a blush gathering on her cheeks in embarrassment. "Don't embarrass me in front of my friends. I drive fine."

Scott raised a brow as if saying he didn't believe her. Nonetheless, he dismissed the issue and grabbed his coat so he could head out, stating, "You are still suspicious. Why else would you be here then? Did your mother send you, because you cleaned out the candy jar last week."

"I did not eat the last Snickers," she quickly defended, only to receive a look from everyone. "In fact, we … heard about Jim and Toby. They are in our class and we were wondering if … you know anything."

The detective stilled for a second before sighing, "I'm sorry. You know I would like to, but I can't talk about open cases before a press release."

The three girls exchanged a pained look before Darci added, "But we want to help find them."

Putting his coat back on his chair, Detective Scott came forward and pulled his daughter into a hug. His words were soft as he stated, "Oh, whatever did I do to have such a kind daughter? Never change. There are not enough kind hearts in the world."

Darci, despite herself, had to bid herself to not tear up, her heart warmed by her father's soft words. They remained that way for a moment before Detective Scott pulled away and smiled sadly down at his daughter.

"I'll tell what I can later. Right now, I need to head out for a press release. We … might need some volunteers tonight. I'll text you the details if you really want to help. Get home safe, my pumpkin badger," said her father kindly, before giving her a quick kiss on the top of the head and heading out.

Despite the serious situation, Claire and Mary both held coy little expressions. Their soft giggles were somehow contained.

Darci at least waited for her dad to leave his office before crossing her arms over her chest and pouting, "What's wrong with your parents loving you, huh?"

Covering her mouth as a soft giggle escaped her, Claire admitted, "Nothing, it's just cute, pumpkin badger, but better question … what now? We need to get a lead here to help us find the boys."

Rolling her eyes and waving a hand in a nonchalant manner, Darci turned to her father's *best dad* mug that was filled with a collection of pens and markers. She then picked it up and pealed a spare key from

underneath it. Stating with a smart grin, the girl proclaimed, “Daddy hides all his good candies in his filing cabinet. Mary, get you your phone ready. We are going to need some quick copies.”

Phone already at the ready, the other girl smirk, “Mary of Communications for Creepslayerz is on it, Intel.”

Giving the other two girls a look, Claire asked jokingly, “If you are Communications and Darci is Intel, what am I? The dog in this Mysteries Inc?”

The two other girls laughed, stating simply, “Steve is the dog. You are the muscle, obviously. We’ll get you a hammer or a staff or something later.”

The three girls then shared a laugh before Mary stated, “Hurry, photocopy faster. Daddy always forgets something. Also, I’m claiming that last Snickers bar.”

…

“Here you go, Barbara. Some Earl Gray. An old favorite of mine. I can make you some Jasmine tea or something else if you want,” said Walter carefully as he handed her a cup from her own kitchen. He didn’t know if it was the stress of the situation or not, but Barbara just burned water in the struggle to make them some tea. Jim did speak of his love for cooking from time to time, so he supposed the well-used cookery and cooking, in general, was probably Jim’s responsibility.

Somehow, he resisted the urge to ask if Barbara was missing any frying pans.

“Thank you, Walter. I didn’t … I don’t know what to do. Thank you for helping me,” she whispered from her chair across the table, her head in her hands while her red hair flowed wildly over her shoulders. She obviously had been asleep when she got the call about Jim. Strickler wouldn’t doubt that she was still in the same scrubs from yesterday as well.

“Not a problem, Barbara. Young Atlas’ safety matters to me as well. I am glad to help,” he said kindly taking a sip of his own tea. “But, I must ask, was Jim acting oddly or anything lately? He was sick the other day. Perhaps he wasn’t really sick and instead something had happened that morning?”

Oh, Strickler had a very good idea what had happened that morning.

He had very little doubt what happened and who the hooded boy was. What the real question though was how Young Atlas *knew* to be there. He brought a disguise, a weapon of sorts, a blanket and apparently, was familiar enough with trolls to back talk to Bular and then save Kanjigar the Courageous. It obviously wasn't just a case of the wrong place at the right time. It was made even more apparent when the Troll Market trolls grabbed the two boys. Usually, Kanjigar had a catch and release opinion when it came to humans. He did not usually run off with them.

Walter didn't know what Jim knew yet or how he was involved with Troll Market, but he was going to find out before Bular.

Face scrunching up like she was going to cry again, Barbara shook her head. "No, he seemed normal. Unless I missed something. Do you … do you think I wasn't attentive enough? That I'm a bad mom?"

Reaching a hand across the table, placing it on top of hers, he smiled sadly, "I think you are a good mother and that you did your best. We'll find him … you can *count* on it."

Side Quests

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh,” said Toby only to cover his mouth a second later as he continued to hide in the alleyways of Trolls Market. He still couldn’t believe this whole thing was happening. It was like a geeks dream, especially if you had an interest in geology. Trolls were sooo cool being made out of living stone. Also, Aaarrrgghh was awesome and the guard dudes were nice enough … even though they tried to feed them rocks at first.

Jim wasn’t happy though. He was far more upset than Toby about the whole being kidnapped/saved from that Gum-troll. Toby personally felt the troll should have been some kind of pink stone with a name like Gum, but what did he know of Troll life and culture? Unlike Jim … who knew more than he was saying.

It all probably had to do with the dream Jim talked about … which apparently wasn’t a dream. The trolls kept calling it a vision. Toby, at first, had thought that Jim was having nightmares or something, but then the troll thing was real. So was it all real? Did that mean Strickler was an evil silver fox as well? Hmm, that would explain the last C+ he got.

Nonetheless, he didn’t miss how the guards Klaam and Guuk always referred to Jim as Young Seer or Prophet. He also noticed that Jim hated it. He’d always pick at the bracelet-thing whenever they used those titles. Jim just wanted to leave. He wanted to go home and cook something, the constant buzz of electricity in the walls lulling them all into a false sense of security.

Toby got it. Everyone wanted security deep down. To be safe. Even that Can-of-Jars troll-guy, or whatever his name was, wanted that, which was why they were being teenage-napped. Or at least Jim was. He had a distinct feeling that they would have let him free … if he wasn’t here to control Jim. How else was he able to crawl out of a first story window –*twice!*- and have nobody notice? It sure wasn’t stealth.

Nonetheless, he had to get to the above world. Jim told him to crawl into a cart or something going above ground, and then … well, Toby wasn’t sure what then. Jim said the entrance to Troll Market was

magic so SWAT couldn't storm the place. And who would believe him anyway?

Hmm, he needed to think this through before he locked himself out of Troll Market.

Sitting in the alley, pulling out a nugget bar, the teenager opened it and stalled as a little guy came up to him. It was a strange little man-thing with a pointed hat and a beard. He was kind of cute actually, especially when he pulled out a makeshift guitar and plucked a few rubber-band strings.

"Well, hey little guy," said Toby as he leaned forward. "You have the soul of a musician, don't you? Want some nugget? I'll give it to you if you help get me out of here."

The strange thing tilted its head … before it suddenly revealed rows of sharp teeth, launching itself at Toby's face. The human, of course, screamed and ran out into the busy streets of Troll Market with a gnome attached to his face. It was at that exact moment of irony that he ran into one of the very figures he was hiding from.

Klaam, losing his cat dinner, quickly tried to get the gnome off the human's face as Toby thrashed about. "Oh, come on whelp, you ran away again? This was supposed to be my break, you know."

…

"Hey, Jim! I got past that creepy black bridge this time," said Toby, entirely too upbeat for his second failed escape attempt that day.

Klaam rolled his eyes at the boy's words and put him down while handing him a thrashing burlap sack. He didn't even reprimand him this time. Instead, he merely said, "Don't cry to me if it tries to eat your face again, Young Tobias. I told you it is not a pet."

Jim, sick of reading troll ballads since he couldn't even make an escape attempt with his boundary-band on (which was why Toby was doing all the escaping), turned to really look at Toby and noticed something in his hands. In fact, it was a familiar figure and it was already trying to nip at Toby's fingers as the other boy took it out of the sack.

No … it couldn't be.

"Gnome Chompsky?" said Jim in question as he abandoned the pile of

tomes on their dwell's stone table. (It was kind of ironic, really. Even though he was not the trollhunter anymore, he was still stuck reading ancient troll texts. There wasn't much else to do after all.)

"Wow? You were thinking the same name I was! And this little guy is awesome-sauce. I found him while I was hiding. He tried to sing me a ballad and then latched onto my face like a face-hugger. I tell yah, you gotta see under his hat. It's like a unicorn horn-"

"No!" roared both Klaam and Guuk as they tried to rush forward and stop Tobias from releasing true evil onto the world … Alas, they were not fast enough.

A few minutes later, Blinky having just risen for the evening while Aaarrrgghh was still yawning, the two trainers were surprised when angry rapping sounded outside the historian's library entrance. A second later, two rather ruffled looking town's guards came into the library. One was carrying both boys under his arms like limp noodles while the other held a thrashing brown sack out in front of him.

"These two are now your problem since the day is done," grumbled Klaam, handing them both over to a rather confused Aaarrrgghh. "The chubby one tried to escape multiple times today … kind of. He really isn't very good at it."

Toby smiled meekly and shrugged while Jim just slapped his forehead and shook his head.

"And the bag is your problem as well," grumbled Guuk as he handed it to Blinky, the trainer yelping when it tried to bite him.

"What in Deya's Light is it?!" barked Blinky as he held it at a distance.

The two guards looked at each other and then simultaneously commented, "The princess' pet. Good luck."

The two market guards were then gone before either trainer could look back up, leaving two very baffled trolls and two very bored humans behind.

"Can we be put down now?" asked Jim, already sick of being carried around by literally everyone. No one carried him this way when he was the Trollhunter. Then again, everyone didn't refer to him as whelp then either. How young did they think he was?

"Oh. Sorry," said Aaarrrgghh as if he forgot he was holding two

humans, the large troll placing them both on their feet.

Blinky, meanwhile, had finally gathered the courage to see what was in the bag, “And what vile beast is in here?”

Peeking in the bag, he barely closed it in time as he reeled back, “Ugh! Vile vermin. What are you two doing with this? It could bite you.”

Jim shrugged nonchalantly, “The only one to be bit so far were the guards … and you best just let us keep it. It’ll just be easier than listening to Tobias whine about it. Plus, as a Disney Princess, I apparently need an animal companion.”

Both Aaarrrgghh and Blinky gave Jim a confused look.

Jim didn’t feel he should elaborate even though Tobias chuckled.

“Well,” said Blinky as he continued to keep the bag at a distance. “I suppose we can fashion some kind of leash … or a muzzle. Yes, probably a muzzle.”

“A dollhouse would be far more effective. Tobias has one at home. So, just let us go, because I’m not telling you anything today nor tomorrow anyway. You are wasting everyone’s time,” said Jim as he stole a chair and tried not to pout. As the day had dragged on, Jim had steadily become bitter as he thought of his mother’s worry… and how he had fucked up his second chance. Also, everything could have been a vivid dream. Just awesome. In fact, every time he was called Young Prophet or Young Seer was like a stab to the heart.

What had happened to him was real … but now he was starting to ask himself: what if hadn’t really happened?

Trolls, it seems, knew an upset young man when they saw one as the two trainers glanced at each other. After exchanging a few hand signals (Blinky somehow losing the non-verbal argument even with the advantage of two extra hands) sighed and sat at the table with Jim. In very Blinkous fashion, he even knew to hand a hanky to the boy before stating simply, “I understand that this is stressful on you, Young Seer-“

“Jim! My name is Jim. Why does everyone keep calling me those stupid titles,” spat Jim, already feeling his eyes getting wet. He did not cry easily. He did not … and yet he found himself comforted by Blinky’s presence enough to turn on the waterworks. He took the

hanky almost bitterly but refused to use it until he ultimately had to. A Trollhunter doesn't cry … they just don't.

Maybe he really wasn't a Trollhunter…

"Of course, of course," quickly stated Blinky awkwardly. "No offense is meant in the titles. It is normal for such … *positions* … to have proper titles. Only close compatriots do otherwise. But, regardless of titles, as we said yesterday, no one expects you to tell them anything until you are ready."

"Though I had hoped you would at least give me some direction today," came a familiar voice. A second later, none other than Kanjigar himself in full armor, came into the library. His large mass suddenly blocking the only exit.

Jim bristled. "I told you. I'm not telling you anything until I am good and ready. And I will not be ready to tell you anything until I get to go home."

Kanjigar sighed, stepping into the room completely as he headed over to the table. Blinky quickly rose from the seat and allowed the large troll to sit across from Jim. Like last night, the Trollhunter once again placed his gauntleted forearms on the table and allowed them to clink loudly before he crossed his fingers together. His voice was soft, but Kanjigar's opinion was obviously unyielding. "I understand that you are upset, Young Jim, but in good conscience, I can't allow you to be freed until this mess is resolved."

"I'm not going to get myself killed," countered Jim, meeting the Trollhunter's gaze. "Even if my past life was a dream -*which it wasn't*- I don't have the muscle mass, stamina, or *weapons* I once did to take on the likes of Bular. I won't let myself be tossed into danger. I'll even have a curfew if you want, but I need to get home before my mother notices I'm gone."

Shaking his head slightly, Kanjigar admitted, "I'm afraid it's already too late for that, Young Jim. Apparently, both Tobias and your disappearances have been noticed."

Jim jumped out of his chair and Toby stopped messing around with Chompsky.

"WHAT?! I need to go home now before my mom panics any more than she already has. And-and Strickler is probably already swooping in and laying the charm on. I don't need to come home to a

changeling stepfather," said Jim with a disgusted expression, making a gagging noise as he thought of Strickler kissing his mom.

Kanjigar raised a brow at the comment and merely stated, "I will check on your mother then and the possible changeling, if it will calm you. As for going home, it cannot be done until Bular and the changelings are gone. You saw them and even confronted them. Since that happened, you are likely on their kill list. The changelings want to keep as invisible as possible … and Bular's appetite is ravenous. To let you go home now, will get you killed faster than a vision. For your safety, you both will remain here."

Hand strangling the hanky he held, Jim no longer felt sad. He was angry.

"I am not leaving my mom up there alone!" he almost shouted before all the energy seemed to leave him and he sat down, his words soft and pained. "I have to let her know that I didn't abandon her like my father did. I … have to take care of her."

There was a moment of silence before Kanjigar added carefully, "You are a good son. I will try to find a way back home for you. Until then, I must ask again if there is any other information you wish to give me? I will be heading out shortly to check out the museum. I need to get that Fetch … and after dwelling on it, Vendel and I agree that your second *prophecy* about, '*It is hidden behind what has been and is*' means the museum. It is where humans keep their history … or what has been. If the bridge is there and incomplete, I need to at least intercede and grab a piece to halt its completion."

Jim's eyes went wide. He could have kicked himself.

"B-but you are still sun-stained. How are you going to fight?" begged Jim, part of him now wondering if he had spared anyone their fates. If Kanjigar got himself killed so soon, the timeline would just repeat itself or *worse*.

"*He will kill you, again*," finally crawled up Jim's throat, the boy automatically regretting it as Kanjigar fixed him with a daunting gaze while Blinky gasped in the background.

Immediately, Jim wanted to crawl into a hole and die. He was never going to tell anyone that Kanjigar had died in his timeline because then he would have to admit that he had been the Trollhunter. And where that had felt like a good thing to him, it felt like an admittance to Vendel that he was or had always been a seer.

The silence that followed was painful like you were alone in the woods and bleeding out. You wanted to cry out, but even if anyone found you … there wouldn't be enough time to get you down the mountain.

Finally, the Trollhunter closed his eyes and released a breath as if merely accepting it, before he turned to Jim, "I had suspected as much given your third prophecy. I am merely glad though that it was I that was felled and not my son. I was uncertain who the warning was for."

Jim merely looked at him pathetically as if agreeing, but he said nothing.

Kanjigar nodded, his teeth audibly grinding, before he asked, "Was my son … was he a good Trollhunter? Did he serve the title well?"

Unable to look at him, almost hearing the pleading tone in the blue troll's voice, Jim swallowed, "It chose another. They found the amulet first."

The troll drew back as if shocked, likely blaming himself and yet seemingly thankful at the same time, before he asked, "And the name of my successor? If I … if I am felled again. I want their training started now."

The atmosphere was stifling, his tongue heavy and his throat tight. Jim was sure if he even wanted to talk right now, he would be unable to. So he merely shook his head.

"Please, Young Seer."

Shaking his head again, Jim finally looked him in the eye, his gaze sturdy, "That is not your concern. If the amulet was meant to choose another … they would already have it."

In other words, Kanjigar would already be dead. It wasn't said out loud but the pained expression shared between Blinky and Aaarrrgghh meant that everyone understood.

"I … see," said Kanjigar, shifting to look at Blinky and Aaarrrgghh before he sighed and regained his composure. "Regardless, I still must go to the museum. It will merely be reconnaissance. A good night for it, given Bular will be kept underground as the humans' search throughout town for you. So, I have no plans of confronting Bular until I am fully recovered. I am still the Trollhunter and if I can stop the bridge, I will do what I must. Death … happens to us all."

Jim swallowed thickly but merely nodded.

“Now, Blinky and Aaarrrgghh will be watching you tonight, and Vendel will be by to check on you. Also, please tell your friend to stop escaping the guards. They must remain vigilant and cannot play games with him. Rest well, Young Jim. I will be back to talk again,” said the Trollhunter as he rose to his feet to leave, the large troll being cornered at the exit by an upset Aaarrgghh and Blinky.

Jim’s Trollish was weak, but even he could tell that they were telling Kanjigar that he didn’t have to go yet. He could wait and heal. They would come with him. Kanjigar said something about watching the humans and that his son would be with him. He was also saying something about the Soothscryer and –

Then Toby walked into his field of vision, Chompsky on his shoulder and eating a nugget bar. The boy was frowning as he grumbled, “I wasn’t playing. I made an honest attempt to escape.”

Despite himself, Jim couldn’t bring a smile to his face. He … just couldn’t right now. Somehow, he resisted the urge to hide his face if only because Toby was here. Toby always understood and he was glad for the support. In fact, as selfish as it sounded, he was glad Toby got snatched up with him.

Feeling drained, Jim admitted, “I just want to go home, Tobes. Cook for my mom and sleep in my own bed.”

“What? You don’t like sleeping on a slab of stone covered in animal pelts?” said Toby teasingly. “I’m super sure there are otter skins on mine. Its *otter-ly* astounding.”

Jim gave him a look.

“Oh, come on. That one was great. And, like old can-head said, he’ll check up on your mom. He also wants to get us home as soon as possible. Until then, having trolls for company isn’t that bad … even if they are a little weird and kidnappy,” said Toby as he turned to the three trolls speaking near the entrance.

Trollish was escaping their lips at nearly incompressible speed for Jim to fully catch and that knowledge just stabbed him deeper. Trollish had been Claire’s job. God, he missed her. How was he ever supposed to win her now? He couldn’t even go to play practice.

Jim sighed and ran his hand through his greasy hair, his words soft so

the trolls wouldn't overhear, "You don't get it, Tobes. They told me everything I thought I knew was a dream. That nothing I remember was real even though they are all the same. Well, kind of. Being around them all down here reminds me of what I lost, especially since none of them are exactly the same … It hurts more than you know."

Toby, watching the trolls butt heads before Kanjigar departed, finally said, "Well, Jimbo. Maybe instead of them not being the same, it's more that you didn't know them as well as you thought you did. Perhaps you are just seeing a new side to them. And instead of thinking of this second run-through as a bad experience, think of it more as you getting to know them a little better. You know, like a second playthrough."

Eyes widening, Jim looked away from the trolls and just stared at Toby as his friend gave him a reassuring grin.

Blinking, his mind trying to truly grasp what Toby had said, Jim swallowed thickly and slowly nodded as he looked at his hands and the hanky he still had. His words were soft, but somehow they held such resolve behind them. "Yeah, another playthrough … and this time we gotta win. Even if I'm only a non-playable character, its okay if everyone gets to live."

At first surprised, Tobias laughed, "We're the NPCs, huh? Well, that means we get to have all the best jokes. Everyone knows the heroes get all the angst anyway."

Jim, stalling, realized how true that was … and then laughed. He paid little mind to the looks the two trainers gave him. So, things weren't going as planned. That didn't make it all bad. The second playthrough let you find all the side quests anyway.

Chapter End Notes

> Sad and sweet … Mmmm, reminds me of Chinese food for some reason. Maybe, I'm just hungry.

Turn Off the Flash

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“No,” was the first thing out of his BaaAch’s mouth as Draal led him over to the weapon’s rack in the Heroes Forge.

“No?” quipped Draal in question as he picked up a staff and eyeballed it. “No to what?”

BaaAch blew the hair out of his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. “No, you are not turning me into an adventure-starved idiot like yourself. I am an artist. I paint and stuff.”

Draal stared at him for a moment dumbfounded before he suddenly started laughing, turning back to the rack to grab a spear instead, “You almost had me for a moment, BaaAch. If you hated adventure you would have never agreed to be my sparring partner all those decades ago.”

Sighing, wondering if he should move to a lesser known and boring troll city just to escape whatever *this* was, the orange troll murmured, “I didn’t get much choice in that given my father was watching the both of us. You also used sparring as an excuse to watch your father train, and how could I say no to meeting Kanjigar when I was that young?”

Draal, giving the spear to BaaAch as if seeing if it was a good fit, shook his head before grabbing it and looking for a new weapon. “Yet you have always joined me when requested even when we grew older.”

Sighing, allowing Draal to give him a heavy two-handed hammer next, BaaAch shrugged, “It’s just not done Draal. I mean, I can spar with you, that’s fun, but one cannot be an artist and a warrior. It just isn’t normal.”

Again, Draal gave him a look that made BaaAch feel crazy before he took the hammer and gave BaaAch a shield with a one-handed sword. He immediately took away the sword but left the shield as he said, “Isn’t there a dwarf saying or something about ‘I’ll paint the battlefield with the blood of my enemies’ or something?”

Rolling his eyes, BaaAch grumbled, “Dwarves are not artists.”

“You didn’t think that when we snuck into one of their ruins in the old country,” commented the blue troll with a knowing smirk, picking up an axe and handing it to BaaAch in almost a mocking manner. “You said you were ‘smitten’ with their stonework.”

BaaAch growled, whispering darkly, “You promised to never bring that up again. We weren’t even supposed to be in the old country exploring those old and dead hearthstones. I thought it was troll-work at first, not dwarves. And it’s hardly worse than what you did. I can’t believe you tried to date a,” BaaAch looked around quick before whispering, “*changeling*.”

Draal’s playful nature faded as he groused, “I did not know what she *was* at first and you promised to never bring that up again.”

Ears falling back somewhat, the orange troll opened his mouth to apologize when an authoritative voice echoed from behind the two younger trolls, “Never bring what up again?”

Draal and BaaAch both turned to see a fully armored Kanjigar at the entrance of the Heroes Forge. Draal looked like he had just been caught by a human and snapped his jaw shut. BaaAch, immediately cursing himself for speaking about what he promised never to, stepped forward and awkwardly grumbled, “A-about dwarven art. I used to … admire it.”

Oh, that hurt. He was probably going to end up as BaaAch the Dwarf Lover for that comment, but Draal’s honor meant more to him than BaaAch’s honor. BaaAch didn’t have a hero-figure’s title to live up to after all.

Kanjigar, to his credit, did not laugh. He only lightly jested, “Well, they are fine craftsmen despite their downfalls, as that dwarven axe you are holding can attest. So, will you be testing their tool out with us tonight, BaaAch? Perhaps give a dwarven yodel while we travel? We will need some merriment while heading to the museum the human whelps came from yesterday.”

BaaAch looked like he wanted to die.

“Yes, he will be coming,” answered Draal for his now humiliated companion, before quickly adding. “Unless you'd rather yodel here? Maybe speak about dwarven art in the pubs? Art hasn't stolen your taste for adventure has it?”

Frowning, wanting to say no given the dwarf comments, BaaAch knew he could not. His art had started to change lately. He wanted to draw the swing of a sword in a blur of yellow and blue. He wanted to draw a fighter's blocky punch in an expression of squares and taut lines. He wanted to capture a warrior's joy as they burst from black shadows and into color.

It seemed he was becoming his father … and it didn't hurt as much as he thought it would. With a sigh, he relented, "Hilarious ... but I suppose my art now bleeds for the inspiration. Just … let me grab some things ... and never call me dwarf-lover again."

"... But we never called you that," said Draal, confused as he watched his friend wander off.

Waiting for BaaAch to fully leave, Kanjigar turned to his son and before Draal could react he was being pulled into a powerful hug, his head awkwardly on his father's shoulder. For a moment, Draal was sure his father was about to sob as he listened to his father breathe. Before he could ask what was wrong, Kanjigar murmured, "I am so proud of you, my son. So proud you are mine and that you will live a long life."

Draal, confused, slowly returned the embrace and hugged his father. He was glad to offer comfort, something he couldn't recall doing since his mother's loss, and there they stood for a minute in each other's embrace. He would stand there as long as his father required. But, slowly, the sounds of Troll Market waking encroached on the moment and Kanjigar let go as if reminded of his duty. He then looked down at his son and cupped his head in both of his hands before pressing their foreheads and horns together. It wasn't a playful butt of heads. It was one of comfort and support.

And then his father pulled away without explanation, stating with a sad smile, "Come, my son, and do know … you can tell me anything."

Standing there, watching his father turn to leave, Draal wondered how much his father had heard and if he would care at all that his son had once loved a changeling.

...

The three trolls made their way out of Troll Market without further fuss, though even BaaAch noticed Kanjigar's silent poise. BaaAch kept throwing questioning looks at Draal, but all Draal could do was shake his head. Not that any of them spoke after exiting Troll Market.

Humans were literally *everywhere* in the dark places where trolls would usually hide, flashlights glittering in the woods and near the river like lost little wisps crying out for their mothers. Only, in this case, the voices were calling out for James Lake Jr and Tobias Domzalski.

It was obviously a search party and so the trolls found themselves ducking through yards and across streets. It felt too daring, a risk of being seen, but at the same time, they all knew that Bular wouldn't risk being out on such a night. Soon, all of the trolls slightly breathless from their mad dash across town (having ignored most of the sewers incase Bular had taken up residence there for the evening), they found themselves before the museum.

Immediately, BaaAch growled, hissing in Trollish, "I smell goblins."

Grunting in acknowledgment, the Trollhunter murmured, "Let's hope they are hiding out as well. BaaAch, stay out here. Draal, we will go inside. Remember, tonight we are not looking for a battle. We merely are here to gather information, and if we can find it, the Fetch."

It went unsaid, but Kanjigar was also looking for the bridge.

Soon, Kanjigar and Draal were wandering through the museum, their footsteps almost soundless for being made of stone. Kanjigar knew it had to be a large room to hide Killahead Bridge. A museum seemed like a foolhardy location for such a thing, but at the same time … it was perfect. A troll would not enter such a busy location lightly and a human was unlikely to think anything of it.

Coming to a room with a large white sheet draped over a display, Kanjigar swallowed. It was the perfect size for the bridge … it was also the perfect place to die.

Banishing the thought, his mind still running in circles from his talk with Jim, he quickly reminded himself that all the Trollhunters before him had given their lives in such a way. A glorious battle was destined to be his death as well, but his hearts were still briskly throwing themselves at his stony-ribcage, terrified and mournful.

Biting back his feelings, Kanjigar squared his shoulders and walked into the room. There he stood before the white covering, light bleeding down from the windows above in a haunting manner.

Releasing a breath, he grabbed the cover and pulled mightily, the cover coming down like collapsing snow. Only to reveal … a boat. A

simple boat. A Viking ship, specifically, given the plaque with it.

Anticlimatic to say the least, but there were still more rooms to look in. This was the only part of the museum that was under construction though and away from prying eyes. It made the most sense. Then again, after Bular chased the Seer halfway across town, they may have already moved the bridge.

Resisting the urge to smash something, Kanjigar barely had time to dodge behind a display when he heard the squeak of footfalls. He really hoped he hadn't somehow alerted the humans. And … he hadn't. Nope, it was two *changelings*. Just wonderful. There was a green one and a purple one. In fact, the purple one seemed upset, her voice echoing over the museum walls.

"What do you mean the goblins didn't find the piece in the delivery truck?" hissed the purple female one. "How did they miss it? I know those little monsters know how to read because they always eat my dessert in the fridge. No one else's!"

"Calm down, Nomura. They eat everyone's lunches or at least drool in them. As for the package, it probably got interrupted or rushed because of the search for those two boys. Almost all the businesses in town closed early to volunteer for the search," stated the green changeling simply, a slight limp to his form. "Otto did say he rushed the package. So, if we are lucky, its merely in the backroom with the normal packages."

"Why did he mail something so important?" growled Nomura.

The green one chuckled slightly, "Did you not do the same thing with the Fetch?"

The blush on her purple cheeks was almost indistinguishable from her coloring, but all Nomura did was grumble and walk faster. "How was I supposed to know some random kids would sneak into the museum and then somehow catch the Trollhunters attention? So, I forgot about the Fetch. I had to move an *entire* bridge today? And what did you do, besides flirt with the boy's mother, Stricklander?"

Stricklander, the green changeling, didn't even bat an eye as he stated simply, "I was gathering information."

"Aaand?" she purred with a knowing smile, slowing somewhat as she rubbed it in.

“And nothing. She knew nothing, and I found nothing during my brief time at her home,” said Stricklander simply.

Nomura merely chuckled like it was a big joke.

Kanjigar, listening to all of this, kept still until their voices were almost whispers.

Coming from behind the display, the Trollhunter crept over to Draal and the wall he had been hiding against. His son had a strange look on his face, one that Kanjigar couldn’t quite place, but he merely nodded as if in agreement and soon both trolls were trailing after the voices.

The changelings quickly led them to a back room, a loading dock from the look of it.

Kanjigar didn’t want a fight. He really wasn’t in any condition for a real battle, especially since he had been batted around the day before by Bular and the goblins. But he knew that there wasn’t going to be much of a choice when the purple changeling pulled out the Eye of Killahead Bridge.

Part of him had been silently pleading with the old gods that this all a delusion of Young Jim, but that would have been easy. Why would Fate make anything easy if she didn’t have to? She was so easily bored after all.

Wanting to wait for the Fetch to be revealed as well, the silence was interrupted by a flash … from above. Both father and son threw a look upward, their eyes glowing in the dim with surprise. The look of shock on their faces didn’t compare to the look of astonishment on the goblin’s face … he obviously had forgotten to turn off the flash. The goblin gave a weak smile as if embarrassed, hit some keys on his cell phone and then proclaimed, “*Waka*!”

A hoard of goblins on the ceiling then jumped onto the two trolls causing Kanjigar to push his son out of the way as most of them fell upon him, “Get the Eye!”

Using the momentum to take up a death roll, Draal bowled into the loading dock heading straight for the two changelings. Stricklander cursed and jumped out of the way while Nomura, waiting until the last second, merely jumped into the air as if on a spring, landing on her feet a second later as Draal rolled underneath her. She then turned to him with one of her blades drawn,

the other arm holding the box to her hip.

“Well, well, well. Hello, Draal. What? No flowers for your old sweetheart?” said the changeling, with a smirk. “Or did you finally decide to man-up and dump me like a real troll? You never did say goodbye.”

Draal, shoulder’s squared, was still having trouble believing she was here. It had felt like … forever. They had literally run into each other in the dark, in the forgotten hearths of the old lands where he wasn’t even supposed to be. He should have suspected something then, questioned why she was there lurking in the shadows, but BaaAch and a few other older whelps were there as well. They were all being stupid back then. So, instead, he had grabbed her hand and dragged her along with them as they all outran angry dwarves.

Somehow, old scaffolding falling under their combined weight, they had both fallen into a crevasse and into the darkness together. They also fell in love then, wandering from glowing tombs and illuminated lakes together, two young hearts slowly becoming intertwined. A first love, for each.

At least Draal believed so. She had lied and lied and *lied* ... And so, he left her there in the dark.

“Give me the Eye, Nomura,” was all Draal could say, taking a threatening step forward. Right now, he couldn’t dwell on such things. Not that he really had time to as Stricklander suddenly attacked from the side, throwing blades bouncing off or embedding themselves in his stone skin. In reaction, Draal quickly brought up his arm, protecting his face before forgetting the girl with the green eyes. Instead, he roared at the older changeling and swiped at Stricklander.

His gait might have been crippled, but Stricklander's reflexes were not dulled in the least. He dodged under a large swipe and took a blade to Draal’s ribs. He didn’t even wait for the troll to react, to feel his stone skin being parted. Instead, he slid to the troll’s back and grabbed one of the crystals protruding on his body. He then pulled himself up and into position, his blade in hand like a nasty little dagger, ready to slice into the jugular. Just when he was about to bring his blade down into the thick of Draal’s neck … a goblin was suddenly thrown right at his head!

“Waka!” cried that goblin as he hit Stricklander, trying to grab some purchase on Stricklander’s face. The green changeling, in turn, could only cry, “Not the face,” as they both fell off of Draal’s shoulders.

Draal, trying to ignore the stitch in his side, decided there wasn't time to deal with these resurfacing feelings. Instead, he rushed forward to grab the bridge piece. Nomura, in turn, slid to the side and brought the pommel of her sword down onto the back of Draal's shoulder, making him stumble and nearly crash into a collection of wooden crates.

Still stumbling, pain running up his side, Draal used the momentum to fall into a barrel roll to cut off Nomura before she made it to the back entrance. The female changeling, sliding to a stop, made a swipe at the troll with her sword, the box with the Eye still on her other hip, but Draal dodged again. Then, roaring in her face, he crashed against her body, slamming her against the wall near the door. Before she could try to slice at him though, he grabbed her wrist and pressed the rest of his significant weight against her.

Nomura choked, the air escaping her as he nearly crushed her. She couldn't even cringe when Draal's face got close to hers as he whispered, "You are the one that lied to me, Nomura. I asked for the truth and you, *you*, couldn't *man-up* to tell me that much."

Eye's widening, her struggles stalled when he asked in barely a breath, "Did you mean any of it? At all?"

Casting her eyes to the side, as if she was trying to think up a lie, she looked him back in the eye and merely said, "Let me go, Draal."

With that, he drew close to her ear, hot breath on her nape as he whispered, "I thought so … but for the record, it was real to me."

A second later, the Trollhunter was sliding up next to them, grabbing a spare goblin off of his horn to throw it at Stricklander while barking, "Grab the Eye! We go, now!"

He then rammed the door open that Nomura had been planning to escape through. Draal gave her one more glance before grabbing the box from her with a rough tug. He was out the door and gone before she could even pull in a full breath, her body feeling listless and weak as she slowly slid down the wall and to the floor.

"Are you alright?" questioned Stricklander, stalling for a second as the remaining goblins all ran out the door to give chase.

Gasping, hand curling around the wrist he had grasped, she said, "Y-yeah, just my ribs. I-I need a moment."

The truth was, it wasn't her ribs. It was something deeper, hidden in a cage of bones, and it was *aching*.

Stricklander cursed, interrupting her growing grief as he growled, "I will give chase. If Bular shows, tell him the Trollhunter has the Eye. Stay here and recover."

And then he was gone, leaving Nomura alone to her thoughts and her inner regrets, but mostly she was left with her heart. She was sure it had scabbed over after all this time with no proof that anything had ever happened besides some scars. It was done with its breaking but, for some reason, it now hurt and ached like that dark day so long ago.

Sitting there, both hands now over where her single heart was located (for the second one was buried deep within a baby's breast in the Darklands), Nomura hung her head and promised she would not weep. Changelings didn't cry. Not because they couldn't, they could, she could attest to that, but it was because a changeling couldn't love … or at least they weren't supposed to.

"Then why does it still hurt, even after all this time?" she asked aloud, hating herself. "Just stop being stupid Nomura. Stop it. It wasn't like he ever loved the real you."

No one ever said she was good at pep talks.

…

Bular, wandering through the gloom of the sewers like an angry street cat, stalled when he heard his cell phone give a '*waka'* chirp. He absolutely hated that stupid message tone and the ringtone wasn't much better, but for the life of him he still couldn't figure out how to change the bloody thing.

Fiddling with the tiny phone for a moment, squinting at the 'you're invited' message from the goblins, he opened it with the tip of his claw. If it was another me-me, whatever that meant, he was going to find and kill the cellphone goblin. He'd make Otto or another one of the changeling fools get him a new cell phone the next time he broke one.

The picture opening, Bular was at first surprised to see a picture of Kanjigar and his son from above. What? Why was this … wait. Was that Stricklander's chicken-thin leg in the background? Was that the loading dock in the museum? No. No. NO!

“I’ll kill you this time Trollhunter!” roared Bular before he rushed down the sewers and towards his longtime opponent. He wasn’t going to let some foolhardy interloper ruin this. Not this time.

Chapter End Notes

I love the goblins in this. The mental image of all of them stalking people with cellphones is funny to me. Plus, it answers the mystery of where Bular got his cell phone. Now, it brings to question … where did the goblins get their cellphones?

Also, we have so few details about Nomura and Draal’s relationship in the show, so I’m going to make a guess and call it first love because I can. Plus, first loves are the hardest to forget so more angst. I kind of what to write an extended explanation of their first meeting now, but there wasn’t space in this chapter for it. Maybe if you guys would like more details, I’ll add it as a flashback or as a side story.

Furthermore, I blame Dr. Who for this influence, but I decided that normal trolls have two hearts … while changelings only have one. They never really said how changelings were made in the series, though the book does offer a description, so I decided to throw a little head cannon in there. It might explain how the babies in the Darklands are so ageless.

A Caster's Charm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The girls just got the case files," said Eli excitedly as he looked at their group text. "They want to know if they should join us in this stakeout or join the search parties to keep up appearances. What do you think?"

"Eli, I cannot be seen in this getup. The girls will probably die laughing and if a picture got out Couch would probably kick me off of the football team for looking like a cat burglar," complained Steve as he looked down at his black shirt and pants. Even his hair was cover in a black helmet, joined with black lines on his cheeks. They were obviously in spy mode and he looked ridiculous. Though, he wasn't about to admit it … this was kind of fun. He still wasn't completely sold on the troll and goblin theory, but this was also better than joining the search with Coach.

He saw enough of Coach at home, smooching his mother.

Ughh . Trauma.

"I think we look awesome, but maybe they will find something on the search like a troll cave. I'll tell them to go out on the search or research the files," merely commented Eli in his own black getup, the smaller boy hiking up his backpack as they both slid into a back alley, the smell of musty fries hitting both of them.

"I think you need to re-review the definition of awesome and aren't trolls supposed to be under bridges or something? Not hobo infested alleys?" grumbled Steve as he watched Eli start to crawl on the top of a dumpster, his legs flailing lamely.

Rolling his eyes, the larger boy gave Eli a helpful shove and soon the slimmer youth was standing on the dumpster. Then, eyeing a nearby rain gutter, Pepperjack latched onto it and started shimming up oddly. He slid down twice before he made it up. Then, flopping on the roof of the Nasty Burger, the smaller boy squeaked something about a grappling hook.

Rolling his eyes, using his upper body mass like a young gorilla, Steve hauled himself on top of the dumpster. He then jumped onto the thin

metal of the rain gutter, squawking as it gave a metallic whine. Yeah, that wasn't going to hold. Shimming up before the drain gutter could be ripped from the wall, he quickly flopped onto the roof, panting like a fish. He had wanted to look cool doing that … oh well.

"Way to parkour it, Steve," said Eli encouragingly as he walked across the top of the Nasty Burger, the museum nearby. "Come on, let's keep an eye out. Everyone knows a criminal always returns to the scene of the crime, and Jim's bike was dropped around here. So maybe we can catch a glimpse of a goblin or something. Then, we just follow them home and bam, we find Jim and Toby!"

Steve sat there, thinking there was a flaw in this theory, but he wasn't the thinker. And quite honestly, when Eli offered him a cool set of binoculars, he was too giddy to care. Not that he would admit stakeouts were awesome or anything … even though they totally were.

…

"Sit. If you wanted something to eat, you should have asked, Young Tobias," grumbled the town's guard as he plopped Toby down in a stone chair across from a miserable looking Jim.

Toby, seemingly not caring that he kept being caught and then toted around like a piece of loose luggage, waved some kind of fried food on a stick. "Look what I got, Jim. Troll food on a stick! I got one for you too. It kind of tastes like popcorn chicken and beans."

Jim sulked farther onto the table, the tomes he was supposed to be reading as the 'seer' having long since become the building blocks for an Arcadia replica. Taking the stick, he knocked over the grocery store accidentally before sighing, "Tobes, no offense, but are you even trying?"

Not even phased by the comment, Toby finished off one of his weird meat sticks (Jim didn't even want to think of what animal it had once been because it wasn't chicken) before stating, "It's all about progress, Jim. I get farther and farther through Troll Market with each attempt. Pretty soon, I'm sure the venders won't even think it's weird that a human teenager is wandering the streets. And then …*victory*."

One of the troll guards sighed in the background, probably wondering how he had gotten stuck babysitting at Blinky's library. After Jim's little *reveal* about Kanjigar's previous fate, Aaarrrgghh and Blinky had whispered in Trollish until the ex-General had grabbed the closest

unfortunate towns guards to watch the two boys. Blinky had all but ran out, simply stating that they needed to speak with Vendel.

“You don’t understand, Tobes. I can just *feel* that Strickler is making the moves on my mom,” said Jim despondently.

“Okay … well, I guess you will have an evil stepfather to add to your *Princess Jim* visage,” said Toby jokingly. “But don’t worry, when I escape I’ll get Claire to call herself Charming and come rescue you. Then, you will have this *captured princess* gig down packed.”

Jim pouted at Tobes as the other boy slowly ate what may or may not been opossum. Yep, this was his life now.

On second thought.

Nope. *Not …going … to … happen*. Barbara Strickler was not *happening!*

Desperate at this point, ready to chew his own arm off like a trapped coyote once he hit his barrier, the teenager suddenly flung himself to his feet and to the front door so that he could rescue his mom. His two babysitters didn’t even have time to react as Jim threw the door open … and slammed right into Vendel, immediately falling on his butt.

“Ah, Young Seer,” said Vendel, pointedly closing the door behind himself before he used a large paw to lift Jim by the back of his shirt like an angry kitten. He then carried the twisting teenager across the room before plopping him back in the chair he had just evacuated, dusted the boy’s shoulder’s off before placing a side satchel on the table. “Your *walk* will have to wait. I have some tests I want to perform … especially after the troubling news you told Kanjigar this evening.”

Jim, desperation quickly draining as he recalled his fumble, immediately floundered in guilt. “I … uh. I didn’t mean to say it like that. About … Kanjigar.”

“Please stand outside,” quickly asked Vendel to the two guards and only once they were outside, did he continue, “What is done, is done, young one. It is not like you had a wizard to teach you otherwise, which is why you should be reading these books on magic. Not … piling them oddly.”

“Arcadia’s not going to build itself,” commented Toby cheekily only to sink into himself when Vendel threw a look at him. Immediately, the

pudgy teenager grabbed a book and buried his head in it, Arcadia Public Library tumbling to the side now that one of its walls was missing.

“Magic?” questioned Jim, trying to remain calm with the whole situation while failing spectacularly. “I don’t need to learn magic, Vendel. I need to rescue my mom and pass my Spanish quiz next week. I can’t even do magic so what does it matter.”

“You can’t do magic *yet*, Young Seer. But many wizards and witches *became* such because they had different types of foresight. Any type of foresight granted them natural magic. They also learned it to help protect or read their visons. Learning at least some stone magic can be-”

Slamming his fist down to interrupt the troll, Jim became defensive, “I told you. I *am not* a seer, Vendel. *Okay!* It was time travel or something! I-I am not some carnival freak-show, fortune teller. What I did and felt was real!”

Vendel sighed, sitting down slowly in a stone chair next to the fuming teenager, reminding himself that the human whelp was upset and likely scared as children tended to be during troubling times.

“I’m not saying what you felt wasn’t real, Young Jim, but stonewalling the very idea of being a seer will help no one. At least do some magic tests for me. They will prove if you do or do not have magic,” said Vendel as he started to remove a collection of items from the satchel he had brought.

Jim eyed each crystal, charm, and stone tool suspiciously before he looked at Toby. Toby peeked over the top of his book and whispered, “Dude, you might be Harry Potter … and then I can be Ron. I already have the hair for it and getting you glasses will be a sinch”

Deflating, Jim turned back to the aging troll and calmly asked, “And if I don’t have any magic in me, you will let us go?”

“Yes, Young Jim,” said the stone being, apparently convinced that Jim would pass.

Toby quickly pointed a pudgy finger at a stone ‘wand’ that had intricate lines carved into it. The base was thicker than the point in classic wand fashion and little crystals glittered here and there on its surface. Picking it up before he had time to regret it, Jim waved it theatrically before shouting, “Expecto Patronum!”

Vendel jumped slightly at the outburst, confused, "… What are you doing?"

Jim was about to use that as his defense of magic-less-ness when Toby chirped in, "That's a pretty complicated spell, Jim. You have to be at *least* a third year and did you have any happy thoughts while casting it? You look pretty grouchy to me. So … maybe a first year spell?"

Groaning, ignoring Vendel's growing frown, the teenager took a less dramatic stance and waved the stone wand as he grumbled, "Lumos."

For a minute both boys held their breath, before Toby said, "Ah well, troll city was fun, but it is no Hogwarts."

"It is not," added Jim as he placed the wand back down and presented his boundary band to Vendel, stating, "Well, as fun as this kidnapping has been, I obviously can't do magic. So, take back your unfriendship bracelet, and Tobes and I will let ourselves out."

Vendel huffed. "Is that what you were trying to do? Magic? Where did you learn such a ridiculous thing?"

"The Harry Potter books, one through seven. Now, bracelet removal time," said Jim, still jingling his wrist at the troll. "I did the wand tests and failed spectacularly."

Scoffing, Vendel lifted a book here and there as if looking for something. "Pah, this Harry Potter needs to be removed from your curriculum immediately. Foolishness. Wands are only tools of fairy folk, not wizards. Also, I find it best to inform you that that tool is a direction stone, not a wand. It, much like the will-o-wisp charm you had on your person, directs its user. But, unlike the will-o-wisp crystal, one has to use their own magic to get it to move. It also does not require a source-item or a physical objective to work. If a wizard or magical being is strong enough, it can direct them in amorphous requests as well like choices you should make, fate, and it's even rumored to help you choose a life mate."

Jim blushed in embarrassment and Vendel smirked like the knowing old goat he was.

"Now," said the troll as he turned back to the items he had brought. "Let's find a real test, shall we. Something easy, for a beginner. All living things have natural magic in them, Young Jim, but only heavily endowed individuals can get a magical tool to react without practice

… even if it doesn't work correctly."

Finally, the old troll settled on a stone medallion from a box of like-trinkets. It was made of a white stone with intricate troll carvings that swirled around a black stone in the middle. It made Jim immediately nervous. Not because it was terrifying to look upon, but because the last seemingly safe amulet shaped item he picked up nearly got him killed repeatedly and thrown in a cage.

"What is it?" said Jim cautiously, noticing how Vendel wrapped the chain three times so that it would fit a human's neck. It had obviously been made for a much larger creature, likely a troll.

"A caster's charm. It belongs to a troll-sage once. It, like a wizard's staff, stores the handler's magic so that spells requiring larger amounts of magic can be performed later. It holds nowhere near as large of a stone as a wizard's staff, but it will do for a beginner. The color the stone takes on will also tell us what type of magic you will lean towards."

Staring at the carved charm, disliking it already, Jim decided to just bite the bullet and grabbed it. For a second, he expected it to call out his name or something, but no … it just hanged there harmlessly.

"Nice bling," said Toby, giving a thumbs up. "Do I get a man-necklace as well?"

Vendel didn't even bother giving the cheeky boy an answer as he stated, "And now we wait."

"Wait?" said Jim, not liking the sound of that as he put the charm around his neck. "How long?"

"It depends on your magic reserves. We should know something within a day," said Vendel casually as he put some of the items back into the satchel.

"Oh, come on," groaned Jim, slouching back into his chair. "You are just trying to buy yourself time. So, what are we supposed to do until Blinky and Aarrrgghh come back? Play pinochle?"

Vendel gave him a look before Jim groaned in irritation, "You are too old for even that reference, aren't you?"

"I know the game, but we haven't the cards," said Vendel casually. "Many references to the human world may escape me, but not all of

them. The far more curious question here though is how you know so many troll references. It has not escaped my attention that you at least know the basics of reading trollish, Young Jim. If you are willing to share, perhaps I could be of more help to you if I knew what your role in your *past life* was."

Jim immediately sat up straight, defensive.

Vendel immediately held up a paw to try and pacify the boy, adding, "You don't have to tell me everything and certainly not about others individual fates, but perhaps you could tell me how long you were in that life? Or perhaps what your position in that life was?"

After Blinky told him the young seer's slip about Kanjigar's death, Vendel would be lying if he said he didn't want to question the boy while he was off kilter. Young Jim seemed bound and determined to protect his visions, but he obviously wasn't emotional old enough or crafty for the responsibility. Thus, if Vendel had to use some slightly underhanded tactics to help Troll Market, he would, especially if the assassin or changelings were on the horizon.

Jim, unsuspectingly, played with the amulet around his neck since he didn't know what else to do with his hands. Past Vendel hadn't given him much attention so it was kind of unsettling to always be in the old troll's radar, but Vendel seemed the most knowledgeable about magic in the market so it kind of made sense. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to speak to him about some things?

"A few months. Not long at all. I was involved in the troll hunting crew," said Jim carefully. "I learned how to use a sword and nearly got killed a dozen times."

Vendel hummed, running his claws through his beard, "It seems odd that a human was invited into the new Trollhunter's fold. Unless … the new Trollhunter wasn't a changeling, were they?"

Jim blanched, horrified at the thought of someone like Nomura or Strickler being the Trollhunter. He didn't know what Vendel thought of the reaction, but he waved his hand, "No, nope. I changed my mind. I can't think of a safe way to talk about this. And I don't know why I should. Kanjigar is still the Trollhunter so it hardly matters who took over for him. They were terrible at it and fucked up more times than anyone cared to count."

Frowning, his mind now swimming with questions, Vendel relented, "I understand, but may I ask one question: was Kanjigar's original death

the same day you saved him under the bridge?"

Staring the troll in the eye, seeing no point in lying about it, the boy admitted, "Yes, it was. I figured there were better chances with Kanjigar than the new Trollhunter. The new Trollhunter … He wasn't cut out for the job."

Looking at Jim curiously, the pale troll couldn't help but inquire further, "And how wasn't *he* cut out for the job? Certainly, if they are never meant to be Trollhunter again, giving me the details will not harm anything. It is not their fate anymore."

Jumping to his feet, seemingly angry for a reason Vendel didn't understand, Jim slammed his fist on the desk while barking, "I don't want to talk about that!"

The reaction was instantaneous. The amulet around his neck exploded into a glowing blue light and the books on the table all scattered from his fist as if violently shoved away. Vendel, barely having caught a large book before it could slam into his face, looked surprised while Tobias was tossed to the floor by a pile of flying books to his chest, his feet flying up into the air as his chair hit the floor.

The silence that followed was deafening, pages from books floating about like escaped birds.

"That was certainly quick, wasn't it, *Seer* Jim," said Vendel pointedly as he waved to the now glowing amulet around the boy's neck. "I was expecting it to take at least an hour or two before it even started to glow. And blue … a rather interesting color."

Jim, now looking horrified, turned to look at Tobes as the other boy got off the floor. "Ow, Jim, couldn't you give a bro a little more warning before destroying town hall? That one book had to weigh like ten pounds."

The tone was joking, Toby obviously didn't mind, but Jim looked horrified. He couldn't stop looking at his hands, the glowing charm around his neck and then at the two beings in the room as if to confirm he had just done that. He ... had just performed magic.

In the end, when Vendel waved for him to sit back down, Jim tripped backward and stormed out of the library, apologizing and saying something about needing to be alone. The two individuals, sitting there, merely watched the last few pieces of parchment flutter to the floor.

Toby, looking at the amulets on the table, quickly asked, “That was awesome. Can I do magic too?”

Vendel, reaching out with one claw to pull the wooden box of amulets out of Tobias' reaching distance, could only grumble, “We can only hope not.”

Toby, trying not to pout, merely groused, “I’d rather have a magic hammer anyway.”

Raising a brow, Vendel didn’t get the reference.

…

Kanjigar tried not to cringe as he ran full barrel across the street as he drew away from the museum, not even trying to dodge the street lamps’ light. He would have never taken such a risk normally, but a few sightings didn’t even compare to keeping the bridge incomplete. Even if he had to stay and fight Bular tonight, that bridge piece had to get to Troll Market and its protective wards.

Luckily, it didn’t seem Bular had shown up yet … and then BaaAch was thrown into the street like a boulder, causing Kanjigar to duck and roll as the wooly troll went flying into a window shop. Glass went flying everywhere as well as used books. Bular, as if summoned by thought alone, was now standing across the street.

Rolling to his feet, Kanjigar’s gaze met Bular’s unyielding stare. The dark troll was just standing there, his shoulders rising and falling as he gasped slightly for air while wiping only a dribble of blood from his lip. He obviously had run the whole way here … and the most BaaAch could do to stall him was to get in one good punch.

“Kanjigar … you are looking worse for wear. Was the sun not kind to you? A little sun-stained I would say. Have you come to the surface for me to finally put you down like the dog that you are?” mocked Bular as he smirked, pulling one of his blades free, the blade seemingly singing as it was freed from its confines.

Standing up straight, Draal sliding up next to him while trying to pull a disoriented BaaAch out of the bookcases, Kanjigar merely summoned Daylight and growled, “It is you that should fear the daylight, Bular. Not I.”

Laughing, suddenly prowling forward just as Stricklander and the goblins caught up, the Trollhunters looked to be cornered and forced

into a fight. But, probably causes by a tripped alarm, the roar of a police siren filled the street. A second later, the flash of red and blue lights popped up down the street. Everyone stared for a second before suddenly scattering like coach roaches from the light.

Kanjigar, taking full advantage of the distraction, grabbed his son by his arm and tugged the two younger trolls along. Bular, snapping his gaze back to the escaping trolls, rushed forward before the cruiser's headlights could even touch him. Stricklander, in turn, was forced into a nearby alley while the goblins all scattered like rats, the cop car drawing nearer.

The race to Troll Market was on.

Meanwhile, across the street on the Nasty Burger roof, Eli and Steve both dropped their binoculars to look at each other with open mouths.

“Creepslayer time?” asked Eli.

Honestly excited and yet terrified, Steve could only nod, “Creepslayer time … Also, we should probably get out of here like now. We kind of look like cat burglars.”

And soon the two boys were slipping off the roof (or falling lamely in Eli’s case) and chasing after the trolls in the background like two clumsy spies. Tonight, was going to be awesome … unless they were both noticed and eaten, of course.

Chapter End Notes

> Jim’s scene totally dragged itself out way longer than I intended … and somehow Harry Potter got in there as well. Also, four years from now (or however long it takes for the Wizards part of the Arcadia series to come out) I don’t want to hear how I am so off with how wizards work in the series. I’m working with what I can from Merlin’s introduction and a whole bunch of head cannon. -_-
>
> Nonetheless, Steve and Eli are on the case! Even though they are just fumbling around like idiots. Hopefully, the girls are better at this Creep Slayerz business.

Paramount Moment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t look at me like that Aaarrrgghh. This error isn’t entirely mine,” whispered Blinky as he hid in a bush with his large companion, the two of them trying to stay out of the flashlights' beams. They had both agreed that they couldn’t let Kanjigar wander the streets alone and had promptly told Vendel about the seer’s loose lips. They both then headed out to look for their champion … only to be painfully reminded that there were search parties out looking for Jim and Toby.

They, unfortunately, had taken the woods route like they normally would. A prime location for search parties apparently.

Thus, now both of them were trapped in a bush trying not to rustle the branches and gain the attention of the flashlights and choir of voices around them.

“Didn’t. Say. Anything,” said Aaarrrgghh as he shifted his branches slightly so he could peek over the bush’s top. Yep, still surrounded.

Blinky blinked all his eyes in irritation, some of them turning in opposite directions to see if there was an opening in the search party’s line. “This whole search party is completely nonsensical. Why are they not searching in the day like their eyes are adapted to?”

“I. Don’t. Know,” said Aaarrrgghh, his voice rumbling like it normally did. The growling tones, though, caused two flashlights to turn in their direction.

“Hey, did you hear that?”

“Hear what? Like a dead body?” said another voice, obviously the other flashlight holder.

There was a moment of silence from the first flashlight owner before said flashlight smacked the second flashlight bearer. “No, idiot. You can’t hear a dead body and why are you so set on that anyway? It sounded like a growl.”

“Growl … like what? Like a bear? A cougar? *Wolves*?!” came a nervous squeak. “Oh, man. Oh, man. Oh, man. Earning extra credit for

Senior Ulh to help with the search is so not worth it if we get eaten! You can't play football if you are missing your legs!"

The first voice sighed, "None of those animals are even around here and wolves are like endangered or something. It was probably a twig or something. Come on, let's not get separated from everyone else."

Blinky and Aaarrrgghh both shared a look, all four of Blinky's hands over his own mouth as they waited for the two voices to leave. A minute passed and then, as the flashlights turned away, Aaarrrgghh and Blinky both exhaled. The sound, unfortunately, caused a different flashlight to slide in their direction, a man with blonde hair suddenly staring at the bush and the eight pairs of eyes glinting back at him.

The man's eyes went wide and he stilled, his lips seeming to tremble in terror before he choked, "M-monstruos."

The two boys, hearing the utterance, turned their flashlight back to the bush and their teacher. They now saw the outline of Aaarrrgghh's large form through the branches, his teeth glinting menacingly in the flashlight's weak glow. Predictably, both boy's screamed, "Bear!!!"

Suddenly, there were voices shouting and barking all around, flashlights swinging wildly as everyone within hearing distance suddenly panicked and searched for the threat.

"I find this to be a paramount moment to RUN!" suddenly screamed Blinky as he rushed past Senior Ulh and the three girls standing next to him. Aaarrrgghh roared in turn and soon the two trolls were dodging and rolling past flashlight beams as if they were lasers. The commotion alone was causing all the volunteers in the vicinity to scream, "Bear," as well. It was utter chaos within seconds for everyone present.

Well ... almost everyone, except for three girls that watched the trolls disappear into the brush with a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

Eyes wide, Claire shared a look with Mary and Darci as Senior Ulh slowly picked himself off of the forest floor, Aaarrrgghh having accidentally knocked the man over. "You two saw that, right?"

"How could we miss it? It was like a pimple on prom night. Not exactly subtle," said Mary as Darci gave her an eyebrow raise.

"Good, because that's the biggest clue we have found all night. Those two might just lead us to Jim and Toby," said Claire with a growing

glint of determination in her eyes. Then, before their harried teacher could call all of his volunteered students over for a headcount, the three girls were gone. Gladly, they following the destroyed woodland path that Aaarrrgghh had so kindly laid out for them.

…

Draal slid around the corner of the house, half tugging BaaAch after him as they ran through another yard, nearly knocking over another barbeque grill. Really, what was with humans and charring their food?

“Snap out of it, BaaAch! It was just a little punch to the … well, all of you, but you’ve taken worse hits,” said the blue troll as he followed his father, yard lights popping on and dogs barking as they rushed through a non-traditional trail. BaaAch was slowing them down considerably with his disoriented stated, but if they left him he would probably be ripped apart by goblins. Luckily, they were only a block or two from the canal. The bad news was that he could basically feel Bular breathing down their necks.

Turning the corner, the only light the trolls’ eyes in the shadow of a house, the younger troll nearly bowled over his father.

“Father, don’t just stand there. We cannot stay and fight with the bridge piece. It’s too important to risk recapture,” said Draal in a rushed whisper, his pride stinging at the thought of running away from any fight.

“It is,” said Kanjigar, tone all business. “Which is why, if we need time, I will remain to defend the both of you. Hide this on your person.”

Pulling the bridge piece from under his armor plating, he handed the stone piece it to his son. Draal held the bridge piece like it was cursed before he looked down at himself and then at his loincloth. Huh, Blinky’s quirky ensemble made a little more sense when one considered the use of pockets. So, both son and father then looked at the drooling mess that was BaaAch, the troll half conscious. The furball could probably hide several goblins in his fur alone.

Without giving it much thought, Bular likely not far behind, Draal hid the bridge piece in his friend’s fur.

Nodding, the two blue trolls then took off, the canal and bridge entrance drawing ever closer as his father led the charge. It felt like

they were racing the sun instead of another troll, a sense of dread hanging over them like thunderclouds.

Seconds later, the sound of heavy footsteps was the only warning their small group received when Bular rushed Kanjigar from the right. The two heavy forms met with a cracking noise and went rolling in the grass like bouncing projectiles, clumps of grass flinging into the air like wayward islands. Kanjigar, currently weak from sun-staining, found himself overpower with his head pressed into the earth.

“How are you supposed to protect anyone else, *Trollhunter*, when you can’t even protect yourself? The sun’s touch has made you weak and slow. Just surrender and I will put an end to your suffering,” mocked Bular, twisting the blue troll’s arm to get a dry cry out of him.

“Father!” barked Draal as he slid to a halt right before the canal’s slope, ready to drop his companion and fight. A stern glare from his sire stalled him though, his legs freezing up. The unspoken demand was simple: *go*.

Spare hand becoming a fist, promising to drop BaaAch off inside the wall and then assist, Draal closed his eyes and forced himself to turn away. He prayed it wasn’t the last time he saw his father, but the bridge piece had to be hidden first. It would just take him a few minutes. He had to trust in his father to last.

Sliding down the incline and into the cement waterway, Bular laughed as he watched the Trollhunter’s heir disappear. The Gumm Gumm's smirk was audible as he added, “That’s your son, correct? My ... what a *coward* you have raised Kanjigar. He probably won’t even last a week as a Trollhunter, if he’s even worthy, but it will be my honor to put an end to your line regardless.”

Kanjigar saw red at the comment. Unlike his son, he rarely lost his temper, but he felt a maddening flame light within him despite his weakened form.

With it a burst of power, Kanjigar slammed his elbow back catching the Gumm Gumm in his lower jaw and neck. A choking noise escaped the warlord’s son and Bular barely had time to jump away as Kanjigar unanimously slashed his sword while rolling way to gain some distance. The blade might have taken off the dark troll’s head if the blue troll had been faster.

Regardless, a slice now marred Bular’s cheek and Kanjigar would have felt slightly victorious if it wasn’t for the flash of pain now running

down his spine. Vendel had warned him, had begged him to remain in bed for this very reason. The physical punishment and quick movements had already started to part the cracked stone-flesh beneath his bandages and armor. He was not ready for this fight … and they both knew it.

Nonetheless, the troll's champion stood up straight to face his opponent like a tree trying to withstand the unforgiving current of a roaring river. He struggled not to pant in pain though he was sure his dimming eyes gave him away.

Pulling out both of his swords, Bular's stance was open and taunting as if he knew Kanjigar hadn't the power to cut him down. The dark troll even had the audacity to remain unguarded as he cracked his neck and rolled jaw as if he had all the time in the world. He didn't even seem to note the cut on his cheek.

"What a pathetic display you make, Kanjigar. You can barely hold your sword, and there is no hooded boy to help you this time. I will slay you tonight," he said in a cool almost business-like tone, the thrill of the chase having worn off slightly. "The only question is how? If you give me back the bridge piece it will be quick and neat. A favor to an old rival."

The dark troll bared all of his teeth then, his tone growling, "But if you do not give it to me and yield, I will keep you alive long enough to watch each of your limbs crumble to dust. *So. Give. Me. The. Bridge. Piece.* I know you took it."

Shifting his stance, Daylight brightening for a moment in challenge, Kanjigar ground out, "Then come and take it."

The clash of their swords was like thunder and lightning, the sound ringing in Kanjigar's ears as sparks went flying from the strength of Bular's swings. Kanjigar knew he should be dodging those blunt powerful swings, that he shouldn't allow the Gumm Gumm to wear him down, but his mind and body were swaying. He was supposed to be dead. He was supposed to be rubble, his life's light claimed by the power of the sun.

He knew he had to collect himself and forget the seer's words, but that was easier said than done while his body was giving out on him. He hated it when Vendel was right.

The brutal attack continued until Kanjigar was panting. He could even feel his stone skin flaking off under his armor, but he continued to

guard his son's retreat. Had it been three minutes or twenty? He had taken and fought so many foes. He was a long-lived Trollhunter, but it seemed it was the sun that would do him in. Bular may get the final blow … but it was the sun that would truly fell him.

He prayed to the old gods that his son wouldn't be stuck with his burden, with the amulet. If Daylight owed him anything, it was that one favor.

His son deserved a long life.

A few more blows from those twin swords were blocked, but the next blow couldn't be parried and Kanjigar felt Daylight being knocked from his hands. Its blade sang as it cut through the air, sheathing itself into the nearby earth a second later before it vanished. He was defenseless now. True, he could normally call the sword back to him, but he was shaking now. His body felt drained of its usual energy. He couldn't even find the mental will to summon the sword. He ... was done.

And with that ... Kanjigar fell to one knee, something wet dribbling under his armor. He was bleeding. This really was the end, wasn't it?

Bular smirked and stepped before the weakened Trollhunter, placing each of his famed swords, *Dread* and *Dire*, on each of the Trollhunter's shoulders. He titled his head as if asking Kanjigar which arm he should take first. Kanjigar merely looked up in defiance, angry that his body had betrayed him.

"Well, if you have no preference, I will choose for you. If you drop your armor … it will be a cleaner cut. I might even be able to keep you alive as a trophy for my father's return," said the younger troll, tilting his head in question. "Relenting will make this easier, my old rival. Just tell me if the bridge piece is on your person or if you have stashed it somewhere."

"I … will not … tell," said Kanjigar as his eyes dimmed.

"So be it," said Bular with a sigh as if this was all a chore. He then thrust Dire into the earth while he kept ahold of his right sword.

The left shoulder then. Kanjigar hated that he hung his head. He shouldn't be surprised … the Seer had prophesized his death after all.

Yet, before Kanjigar could listen to Dire cut the air, to feel the bite of pain in his failing form, a green blur slammed into the famed son of

Gumar. A familiar roar echoed over the canal's expanse as Bular shouted in shock. Kanjigar barely rose his head in time to see Aaarrrgghh tackle Bular, the ex-General's green glow filling the darkness.

Blinking, his mind telling him that there was no way that was Aaarrrgghh, the Trollhunter felt two sets of arms pull him up from his armpit and haphazardly to his feet. W-when had he fallen to his other knee? Hearthstone's light … he was so tired. How much blood had he lost? Trolls did not bleed gallons as humans did, so any wounds or injuries that bled were always a worry.

His back and shoulders felt wet.

"Come now Kanjigar, to your feet. I cannot carry your weight all on my own," came a familiar voice as Kanjigar was tugged forward, his weight almost crushing the smaller troll assisting him.

"B-blinky? W-what?" the blue troll mumbled as he almost fell down the incline for the canal, Blinky somehow keeping him from falling on his face. He didn't know how. He had to be heavy with his armor … Ooh, wait. When had his armor faded? And was Aaarrrgghh really fighting Bular right now? "W-was that Aaarrrgghh? But his vow."

"Aaarrrgghh's vow is his own to break and uphold as he sees fit, Kanjigar. And I think he values you more so than his vow. Right now is hardly the time to discuss it regardless. Come on, we are almost liberated. Forward on we march," encouraged Blinky, Kanjigar's wounds seeping now that the armor was gone. His vision was starting to swim as well. Despite himself, he leaned even more on his small companion.

He wasn't sure how far he made it on his own, the sun-stains stealing his strength, but Aaarrrgghh was now under his other arm and half dragging him into Troll Market's entrance. Closing his eyes, he wondered if this was a sign … he hadn't died because, in some ways, the seer had intervened again. He generally worked alone, but now he had companions at his side. He hadn't realized it, until right now, how much he had needed them all along.

"You. Going. To. Be. Okay," said Aaarrrgghh, the opening to Troll Market closing behind them all like.

…

Meanwhile, at the ridge of the canal on their bellies like makeshift

scouts, two sets of teenagers shared a look. All of them had wide eyes as they had just witnessed the whole exchange: the chase, the battle and Aaarrrgghh's intervention. Now Bular was limping away from Aaarrrgghh's quick and brutal assault like a pouting puppy. Well, a rabid puppy. And all of them were internally praying that the black troll didn't come back up their side of the waterway.

Collectively, Steven, Eli, Darci, Mary and Claire all held their breath … until Bular stumbled away in the opposite direction, cursing.

"What are you three doing here?" finally hissed Steve, still on his belly as he stared at the girls that were about three meters away. Eli, next to him, merely waved like a dork.

The girls, on their bellies as well, waved back before Claire whispered back, "We chased the green troll and his big headed friend. We ran into them during the search party. What are you two doing here?"

"We followed the armored troll that was getting his butt handed to him," said Steve. "I thought he was going to be done for and that I was going to have to shield Eli's pure eyes."

Eli, dropping his binoculars as he watched Bular fade into the darkness, took a moment to look confused.

"I thought he was done for as well, but at least we now know that the black troll is nobodies' friend," said Claire as she directed her next question to Eli. "Hey, was it the Bridge Group or Mr. Unfriendly that took Jim and Toby? Please say it was the Bridge Group because I really don't want to follow Mr. Unfriendly to wherever his hideout is."

"Well, Mr. Unfriendly," reasoned Eli, "was pinned to the construction site, so it had to be the Bridge Group. Question is, how do we get in there now? It obviously was some kind of magical portal that they ran into under the bridge."

Mary, finally looking away from her phone, raised it up to show she had been taking pictures the whole time. A horngazel glowed on the screen as a zoomed in photo. "We need one of these stone pens, obviously. Duh. Am I the only one that pays attention here?"

The rest of the teens all gave Mary a look. Not that she noticed. She was messing with her phone again.

"Okay," said Claire as she raised into a crouch, still unwilling to completely stand up if Bular was still around. "Let's head back to Eli's

place and make a plan. We are getting under that bridge and no trolls are going to stop us because we are the Creepslayerz."

"Yeah! Creepslayerz!" cheered Eli, only to have Steve slap a hand over his mouth while the girls all shushed the ecstatic founder for the group. "… Oh, sorry. I just get excited sometimes. It's nice having friends."

Chapter End Notes

> Hey guys, sorry for the lack of updates. Life has been hard lately. Family sickness, moving, and job searching is putting a lot of strain on me. Mauling Kanjigar made me feel a little better though. Sorry baby Kanjigar, I love you, I do, but this authoress needed to maul something … and, unfortunately, murder/ mauling is generally frowned on in all 50 states. ^.^;

Shades of Magic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim wished he would have gone farther when he stormed out of the library, maybe the mushroom cliffs again, but the truth was he didn't really have anywhere to go. The stupid boundary bracelet was unpredictable at best and he strongly suspected that the distance was directly affected by Vendel's location. And though Vendel spent most of his time at the Hearth Stone, it wasn't worth walking into an invisible wall whenever the old goat moved. Besides, the two town's guard probably would have followed him anyway.

In the end, he stomped up the stone steps outside the dwell and to the top of the library's roof which housed a small garden and patio-like area. It was far yet close enough that he could have a quiet breakdown in peace without the town guards following him. He also suspected that he did it so that Toby could find him.

"Stairs? Really Jim," huffed Toby a few minutes later as he stumbled up the stairs and into the sitting area on top of the dwelling. "You know I am vertically challenged."

Despite feeling miserable, Jim snorted and dropped the amulet he had been looking at, the heavy metal swinging around his neck. The teenager couldn't help but notice that the stone was now warm and almost clinging. It felt like a little fire, a little life, and he no longer had the heart to take it off despite his earlier want to chuck it off the roof. It ... felt like a part of him.

Toby collapsed next to him in one of the large stone chairs, the pudgy boy staring at the Heartstone in the distance. He allowed the silence to hang for a little while, the two boys just basking in the comfort of each other's presence and the light of the Heartstone. Sometimes words just weren't needed. And so they sat, watching the cave fireflies hang in the air while some unknown species of luminescent salamander crawl on the stone wall beside them.

"It is no Hogwarts," finally said Tobes, disturbing the silence, "But it sure is pretty. And a lot less deathy probably. You know because the adults are actually doing the fighting and whatnot instead of an eleven-year-old boy."

Snorting, Jim nodded, “Yeah, I guess, but Tobes … I’m not *supposed* to have magic. I was supposed to go home, be a normal teenager, and take care of my mom. That was the deal I made. I was supposed to be a nobody. I’m not supposed to be a seer.”

Toby frowned and asked seriously, “But do you really want that Jim? To be normal? I mean look at this place. It is *amazing*. There is actually magic and *you* have it. Not me, not anyone else, *you*. And so what if Ven-smell is right about you always being a seer. Or, if he is wrong, you can look at it this way Jim: maybe being a seer is penitence for denying your past life. Fate didn’t know what else to do with you, so you now have cool glowy powers. That is awesome. And quite honestly, at this point, you can’t prove the seer debate either way. No one can. So, who cares if you are Seer Jim or Time Travel Jim, it’s better than the past life you left, isn’t it?”

Nodding, glad he wouldn’t be responsible for releasing Gunmar, Jim conceded, “It is better. I messed up … really badly at the end, but I liked some things. There are some things I want back.”

Toby agreed, “Well, then go get them again. I mean, being a seer has to have its perks, right?”

A smile gracing his lips, frail and tired as it was, Jim added, “Yeah. At least it comes with some perks … I just hope magic is a lot like cooking.”

Tobias chuckled, “Doubt it. It’s probably like calculus. There has to be a downside after all.”

Humming, Jim nodded, “Probably. I … just want to let my mom know that I’m okay though. I hate to worry her.”

“Same. Nannas probably noticed I’m missing by now, even if she is legally blind,” said Toby playfully. “So, do we just want to chill here or see how long we can roam around Troll Market until the town guards haul us back to the goat-face? Maybe if we are bored, you can see if your magic expands into Jedi mind tricks. ‘These are not the teenagers you're looking for’ and then we can go float some rocks or something.”

…

Jim quickly found out he was not gifted with Jedi mind tricks, and so the two boys spent about three hours dodging through alleys whenever they saw a town guard. Jim was almost feeling like his old

self. Tobias' pep talk really seemed to have struck a chord with him because being a seer … didn't seem so bad. After all, there was no proof either way if Jim had lived that old life. Even if it was a time traveler, he had overwritten that timeline by saving Kanjigar. He had made that choice, and if being called Seer Jim was the price he had to pay to stop the return of Gunmar, then so be it.

Panting in a side street, beside a barrel of old shoes as two town guards rushed by, the two teenagers started laughing. It was unmistakable now … the guards were looking for them. Not that either boy minded. In the last two hours, a simple walk had turned into a strange game of hide and seek. It might have been childish but, hey, they were children technically.

"Did we really have to run the last few feet?" panted Toby, too tired to laugh anymore. "They probably only saw us because we ran. I think they track by movement … like T-rexes or something."

"I'm pretty sure that is wrong Tobes," smirked Jim, walking forward to peek out the alley. The two guards were further down the busy street, talking to a vender that carried his wares on his back like a loud clanking mountain of dishware. Jim could even hear the large vender's pots click and clack as he pointed in Jim's direction. Jim didn't even have time to duck back as two guards looked up and immediately glared at him.

Not knowing what else to do, Jim smiled nervously and waved before stepping back into the alley. He walked past Toby nonchalantly as he commented, "Are you done catching your breath Tobes, because I'm pretty sure they saw me. So … we should probably go."

The pudgy teen ran his hands down his sweaty face, moaning at the horror of it all. Jim ignored him and jogged the short distance to the other side of the alley, one foot going midair before he quickly scrambled to grab a neighboring building. The alley was a dead end … right into a cavern, glowing crystals illuminating the ravine and the small river below.

Falling back against the wall of a building, his hand on his chest, Jim panted, "Who put an alley here facing a ravine! Haven't they ever heard of guardrails or something."

Toby, stumbling over, glanced down into the ravine that Jim had nearly walked off of, whistling as if impressed, "Well, that sure gives *dead end* a new meaning, doesn't it?"

Jim rolled his eyes and gathered himself, looking around in a hurry, “Okay, we have three options, we can break into someone’s dwell through a window, crawl up onto a roof, or reenact The Fugitive.”

“I don’t know Jim … I don’t think we have the acting skills,” commented Toby as he glanced down at the echoing darkness, the huge crystals below seeming to distort the distance.

Giving Toby a look, wondering if he could hoist Tobes into one of the windows, he didn’t even get to voice his escape plan when he was suddenly tugged away from the ravine. He was immediately manhandled as if all of his limbs were being counted before the troll handling him sighed in relief.

“Young Jim,” said the town guard, his tone chiding as if he was speaking to a small child. “We have been looking for you. Vendel said he needs your assistance … immediately.”

“Assistance?” said Jim, a sinking feeling forming in his gut. “With what?”

…

“You want me to do what?” said Jim, unable to look away from Kanjigar as he was fussed over in the healing dwell by Vendel, Blinky behind them and paging through one book or another. The current Trollhunter looked like death. He barely seemed able to sit up on the examination stone. He looked frail and breakable, like a glass plane developing cracks. And yet, despite waving off Vendel’s attempts to get him to lay down, he sat and bore the pain.

“To try a minor healing spell, Seer Jim. You have a lot of natural magic reserves and I believe you will be of much help to Kanjigar and his health,” repeated Vendel as he lifted the soaked cloth from the Trollhunter’s back to glance the reopened sun stains. He shook his head and signed, grumbling something in Trollish before covering the cracking skin back up with the herb-drenched towel.

Jim looked down at the amulet around his neck, lifting it up as he stared at the glowing stone. He barely found out he had magic a few hours ago and already Vendel expected him to use it?

“Isn’t my magic supposed to be for battle? Not healing?” asked Jim as he stared at the cracking stone skin of Kanjigar’s arm, now being slathered in one herb or another. It looked painful and debilitating. Even from here Jim could see Kanjigar bracing for the sting.

Honestly, Jim didn't even want to be here doing this, he didn't even know if he could, but his hero complex wanted to help in any way he could … even if he had to be a nurse for Vendel.

Vendel, picking a loose piece of stone flesh with his claw, turned to look down at Jim. The boy obviously didn't want to be here, using his magic, but at the same time Vendel wasn't surprised that Jim had come to help regardless. The color of his magic spoke volumes of his character after all.

"And why do you say that, Young Jim?" said Vendel carefully, wanting to weed out the source of inaccurate information as quickly as possible. Blinky and he would be the seer's main source of magical knowledge after all and he wanted any inconstancies weeded out now, especially after that Harry Potter incident. He still hadn't found those books …

"Well," said Jim with a shrug as he lifted the amulet around his neck to stare at the glowing blue stone. "Kanjigar's armor glows blue and mine is the same color. So … I figured I would have the same fate as him. To fight."

Kanjigar turned slowly, looking at Jim with a slight frown, "Is that all you think my station entails, little seer? That I am merely a tool for battle?"

Jim frowned in turn, knowing he had just insulted Kanjigar. Yes, he knew there was a lot more to the position, but during his time in the position, it felt like one battle after the other. As soon as one enemy was felled, another would rise to take their place.

Not knowing what else to say, he simply stated, "I know it is a position of respect, and that you deal with any call that comes to you, but all Trollhunters seem to do is fight or catch gnomes."

A warm gust of air escaped the blue troll's nose as if he wanted to chuckle, Kanjigar replying was in a warm tone, "It has been a very long time since anyone has bothered me with gnome capture, that is a task given to new Trollhunters or fledgling adventurers mostly. And though it may seem all I do is fight, my purpose is to protect. If I must do that with a sword or simple public service, I will uphold that vow until my end."

Vendal grunted in agreement before he added, "There are many shades of magic, Young Jim. Some wizards could even call up more than one color or change it as their values shifted, but blue has always

been a magic associated with the bringers of peace. It is a color of stability, confidence and loyalty. It is something to be proud of."

Standing there, hand wrapped around the amulet as shades of blue light bled through his fingers, Jim felt honored and yet a feeling of trepidation was crawling up his spine. He was being followed by this color, wasn't he? And it brought into question: what other fates were following him around as well?

Ignoring the disquiet feeling filling his stomach, Jim straightened his spine. If it saved Claire's little brother and kept Gunmar from returning, it was worth it. Everything was worth it if the ones he loved were safe.

"So … what do you need me to do? I can throw books, but I don't know how that helps in this situation," said Jim with a nervous smile, feeling suddenly embarrassed about how he stormed out on Vendel earlier.

"Throw books? Why ever would you do that? Such a depository of knowledge should be respected and …," Blinky stalled as an aghast expression took over his face, one of his eyes twitching. "Was my library violated? Vendel, you said you would watch him!"

Vendel rolled his eyes, waving a paw at the insulted historian. "I said I would teach him what he needed to know and your books just happened to be in the way."

The trainer started to puff up but immediately deflated when the elder troll added, "Did you find that spell Blinkous or will I have to look for it myself as Kanjigar continues to flake and bleed on my slab?"

Grumbling something in Trollish, Blinky paged through a heavy book he had in hand. A moth or two even went flying out of the pages, showing off how rarely the tome was used.

"Ahha! Here we are. A spell to bind stone and imbue it with magic. Or, in a troll's case, a healing spell. The Celts were quite fond of using it in their stone work," said Blinky. "Now Jim, I know Vendel said you just got your amulet today, but he said you have great promise. So, if you cannot do anything, do not be discouraged. You will have all the time to work on Master Kanjigar while he is stuck under house arrest – I mean, bed rest."

Kanjigar, even being light headed and miserable, turned an unamused glance at Blinky.

Blinky laughed nervously in return and then coughed into one of his hands, presenting the book to Jim.

Jim, with trepidation, accepted the book. The pages looked so old he was almost afraid to touch the parchment. It had to be spelled or something to still be in one piece. He blinked at the language, at a loss. He suddenly missed the Trollhunter's amulet and its translator.

"I can't read this," finally admitted Jim, hating the feeling of helplessness.

"Blinky's excited smile faded somewhat as he stated, "Its simple Gaelic, Young Jim. Are you not of Indo-European descent?"

Still standing there with the book awkwardly in his face, Jim could only admit, "I think I'm fifty-percent Italian. And this looks old Blinky. I doubt anyone but a linguist could read this now."

"Ah, I do forget how quickly humans change their language. Its quite fascinating though, to see how words change and adapt, or how languages become –"

"Blinkous," said Vendel in warning.

"Uh … perhaps another time. Now, most wizards merely need to will magical energy into action when it's a simple spell, but if they want to do a more complex spell or allow others to use their stored magic, they use polyjuice's or create items imbued with those magical properties."

"Like the Trollhunter amulet?" interrupted Jim, staring at the glimmering item in question as it sat there harmlessly on the slab beside its current bearer. A part of him wanted to touch it, to see if it would remember him, but at the same time, he didn't want to tempt fate.

Surprised for a moment, Blinky nodded, "Yes, yes, it is. Those kinds of skills though are for long practiced magic users. For someone of your skill, or lack therefor of, prewritten spells to help direct your unpracticed magic might be more practical."

Jim's face fell, "Please don't tell me I have to rhyme."

Blinky pressed his fingers together as if thinking and then shrugged, "Yes, if that is what the spell requires."

“Ugh, its poetry 101 all over again,” groaned Jim as he rubbed his temples.

Ignoring the whiny teenager, Blinky merely nodded and walked the teenager over to where he needed to stand, “Alright, now hold your amulet as you are right above this patch on Kanjigar’s forearm. Just hoover there and imagine cracked earth being saturated with water after it rains, melding earth back together or glass unbroken. Hold that thought and repeat after me. If you do well, we will move to his shoulders and back.”

Despite holding still, Jim couldn’t help but note that Kanjigar went ridged as his hand floated over the stone flesh. Nonetheless, he repeated after the historian, promising he would be a better student this time around.

“Strong as a stone, whole. Never to bend or fold, uphold,” said Blinky, enunciating carefully.

Jim nodded, the words flowing from him uncertainly, but quickly he felt his hands warming and his tongue quickening. He didn’t know if it was in his head or if his voice was gaining an echoing quality, the air seeming to turn blue like the color of his gem. Then, like cracked earth being washed away to make way for new growth, Kanjigar’s greying top layer of skin seemed to fall away like loose sand, scarred yet healed flesh revealed.

After that, the words seeming to echo on his lips as he moved his hand upward watching the tension disappear from the Trollhunter’s form as more and more sand formed at the base of the slab like forgotten imperfections. It wasn’t until he felt breathless, his stomach heavy and his head light that Jim stalled, staring at the stitched back and shoulders of the current Trollhunter. He would have moved onward past the sun stains, but the amulet in his hand was starting to flicker as if empty. He knew he had nothing left.

Panting, Jim looked to Blinky for encouragement. And, as usual, Blinky rarely disappointed

“Well done, Young Jim,” said Blinky warmly as he placed a hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “I knew you could do it.”

Jim, hungry for the same praise from his old life, smiled tiredly as he said, “Thanks Blinky. I would like to do more, but I don't think I can. If it’s not too much to ask, I’d like to lay down now. I feel kind of light headed.”

Blinky quickly complied, ushering Jim to bed like a weary legged fawn before Kanjigar could even properly thank the young wizard. The historian really did have a fatherly side when he wanted to and Jim was all too glad for the praise. Kanjigar almost smiled. Those two would be good for each other.

Watching the young mage and historian depart for a moment more, Kanjigar turned to Vendel and spoke softly in Trollish. He would have discussed this in front of the others, but the less that knew, the better. “Have you decided where to hide the bridge piece?”

Glancing back out of the corner of his eye to see if anyone was still around, Vendel replied softly in Trollish, “No, I have not. I almost considered leaving it in the fool’s mane. It was nearly impossible to find and untangle.”

The Trollhunter might have chuckled if he wasn’t still in pain. Jim’s clumsy magic had been effective, certainly, but it wasn’t a complete miracle cure. There would still be scarring and an ache until the stone flesh hardened completely. Such an inconvenience wouldn’t keep him from his duty though.

Hopping off the slab, Kanjigar offered his hand out, palm up. He could tell the older troll was irritated with him moving at all, but merely grunted in agreement. A second later, a wrapped stone was offered to the troll’s hero.

Nothing else was said as Kanjigar left and Vendel didn’t watch him go. No one else needed to know where that stone was being buried … except for the one willing to die to keep it hidden.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello dear readers. Been a while. All my writing time has turned into application time and getting ready for the holidays. I hope you all have been well. Have a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays.

Good People

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If the cafeteria noticed the disturbance in the force that morning, the Creep Slayerz didn't. Mary, Darci, Claire, Steve, and Eli had all gathered at a back table, whispering their plans while sharing any data they had gathered the night before.

"Okay, I get there are trolls and that we need to get through that magic troll-portal to save Jim and Toby, but I still don't get what the Milk Carton Epidemic has to do with all of this?" said Darci, still feeling a little guilty about taking the information from her father.

"Well," said Eli, pushing his glasses up onto his nose. "I remembered an article, about one kid that got away when his brother had been unable to during the epidemic. The article mentioned that the two brothers were traveling under a bridge on their bikes and both were grabbed. The older brother showed up a few weeks later saying he only survived because he, 'Was pushed into a magical cave by a blue stone man.' Now, everyone just thought he made things up because he was too traumatized to remember who took his brother. They also believed that the perpetrator left town because the survivor finally managed to escape and knew his face. After all, the Milk Carton Epidemic officially ended after the survivor escaped."

"So …" said Claire, catching on. "The trolls were likely involved with all those disappearances back then. I still don't know how that helps us now Eli. Unless you are saying that Jim and Toby are the first kids to go missing in a whole new kid epidemic."

The excited smile on Eli's face slowly vanished and for a moment there was a somber silence amongst the Creep Slayerz.

"Well," said Eli, his voice wavering for a second before he tried to perk back up. "I don't think that's going to happen again, but that story makes me think of Jim and Toby. They both obviously saw trolls, just like the survivor boy, and they were likely pulled into the magical cave like the survivor was. The only difference is that the survivor … somehow got out."

"And that helps us how? Even if this kid was in the troll-portal and got

out, you don't even know his name," said Steven between bites on his sandwich. Coach was the only one at home this morning and had made him lunch. There were a lot of things he disliked about his mom's new live-in boyfriend, but Coach could make a mean sandwich.

"Ah, but we do have his name," corrected Eli, revealing a folder so that the whole table could read it. Well, except Steve. He was too busy stuffing his face.

It was an old police report dated around the time of the Milk Carton Epidemic. There was a lot of jargon in there, but it basically told a sad tale of two brothers. The two boys were the first to go missing that year. The eldest boy had shown up at home weeks later saying that his younger brother had been grabbed under the bridge. He had also claimed that a 'blue stone man' had shoved him into a 'magical cave' under the bridge. When they went back to the scene, they found nothing new.

"See, it's the same bridge as last night, Holland Transit Bridge. So, it has to be the same 'magical cave'. And, now that I have this report, I know the name of the survivor: Jack Sturges. His name wasn't mentioned in the article to protect him from the 'kidnapper'. But, now that we know who he is, we can ask him how he got out of the cave. He might even know how to get in!" said Eli, so excited he was almost vibrating off of his seat.

The girls exchanged a look before Darci dared speak, "Okay, so we have a name. That was like fifty years ago. He could have moved away or be dead by now."

Steven, in return, mumbled something while chewing his food, the boy nodding at his sandwich in approval.

The three girls turned and stared at the blond.

"Care to repeat yourself?" said Darci leaning away.

"Muhmd thum hu ooolfeeel," he said again, his cheeks plump like a chipmunk.

"Eww, gross Steve. Swallow your food," added Mary, her lip upturned.

Swallowing loudly, Steve repeated himself, "I said that guy mows the football field. He's crazy and is like a doomsday prepper or something. He even has metal blinds that cover all the windows at night and everything."

“See. He’s still here!” said Eli, nearly jumping out of his seat again. “Now, we just need someone to go and ask him how he escaped, and then-”

“And then what?” interrupted Darci, frowning as she waved her hand. “We just walk right into that magical cave entrance? Jack was missing for weeks on end, right? We’ll probably go missing just like him. Are you sure we shouldn’t just have the adults deal with it? I’m sure my dad would listen to me if we just told him.”

Pushing his glasses up on his nose again, Eli shook his head, “Jack told them the truth all those years ago and no one believed him. I told you, we have to do this on our own or the government will just cover it up. And besides, we don’t want this design going to waste, do we?”

Smiling from ear to ear, Eli then revealed a design of a monster costume. Wait, no, a troll costume.

Mary laughed, “Ha, troll fashion! When do we start?”

…

“Why do I have to go speak with the crazy survivor alone?” complained Steven as he stood in Eli’s garage later that day, watching the girls and Eli jury-rig a troll disguise together. He was pretty sure that trolls didn’t have headlights for eyes, but what did he know about all this supernatural junk. He honestly didn’t even know why he was still involved.

“Well? Can you sew?” said Mary, standing on a step stool.

“No,” he said with a shrug.

“Can you weld?” asked Darci in turn.

“You can?” said Steven, surprised.

Eli, taking off the first draft of the troll head, added, “Don’t worry, Steve. I can go with you. I’m sure the girls can deal with the designs.”

Claire, jumping off another stepstool because the costume was getting rather large, stepped forward, “No, you can stay here Eli. This is your design. I need to go watch Enrique anyway before it gets dark. Mom is using this whole thing to boost security in town and needs to be out there gathering supporters. So, Steve and I can go talk to this Jack Sturges guy and then drop me off at home.”

“But we need you to help us finish the costume,” argued Mary, lifting up the shag rug they were sewing together for the fake hide. “I can’t sew this all by myself.”

“I don’t know if you can sew it at all,” joked Darci, a stitch tearing suddenly, causing a whole wooly arm to fall to the floor in a puff of dust.

“Okay, okay,” agreed Claire, her hands up in defeat. “I’ll come by later tonight once my dad gets home. I’ll just say I’m going to bed early and then sneak out the window or something. It’ll be fine.”

…

Jack Sturges was a complicated man. Angry some would say. Crazy is what the other half would state. And he was often torn about these descriptions of him. He didn’t want to be bitter and he certainly didn’t want to be known as crazy.

But, a heart is formed by the experiences of its youth, and Jack’s was drenched in sorrow when his baby brother was ripped right from his grasp. He had tried to hold on. He had tried to hold onto Jimbo that day under the bridge, but he had been tugged right out of his grip by that hungry thing in the dark. Then, he hadn’t even been allowed to chase after Jimbo’s screams. He had been pulled away by another monster in the night, one that glowed blue.

‘*Don’t make a noise. Stay behind this wall! Don’t move from this spot*!’ had barked the blue stone figure before thrusting Jack into a stone room, the entrance closing behind him.

He wished he could say he beat his fists against the stone entrance until they were bloody, but the truth was, he had gone quiet in the dark. To this day … he hated the dark even though he didn’t entirely remember what happened there.

Placing a hand over his eyes, Jack turned away from the landline phone on the kitchen table. He didn’t know why he was doing this to himself, remembering all of this, but he knew it had to do with that smiling boy on the front page of the newspaper. Jim Lake Jr. His great niece’s boy. He … had never met Jim. He was sure Barbara didn’t even want to associate with him given his paranoia, and yet he sometimes wondered if she chose the name Jim in remembrance of his baby brother.

He doubted it, but it was a nice thought.

Looking at the phone again, he debated on calling her and asking if she wanted him to come over. Much like himself, he knew that Barbara really didn't have much family in the area anymore. None really … except for himself and they didn't have much of a connection.

His own fault, he knew. He should have made more of an effort to get over his fears and paranoia. He could have tried to be normal. He could try harder to forget that night with his brother Jim and those missing weeks. Then again … he should have tried harder to hold onto Jimbo's hand.

Maybe he shouldn't call her. He was in one of his moods it seemed and that wouldn't be of any help to her.

Suddenly, if only to distract him from his own painful thoughts, there was a knock on the door. He nearly jumped out of his kitchen chair, his eyes turning to the six deadlocks on the front door. He … never had guests.

Again, the door was knocked.

Frowning, part of his mind telling him it wasn't dark out so he should be fine, he rose and carefully opened the door, peeking out. On his porch, were two teenagers. They were too old for girl scouts –one of them wasn't even a girl- so it probably was the local high school trying to gather donations for the jumbotron or something ridiculously unnecessary.

Nonetheless, he opened the door.

"What do you want?" he asked, eyeing the two suspiciously.

"O-oh hello, my name is Claire and this is Steve. We … were … writing a history report … about our town. Weren't we Steve?" said Claire, throwing a look at Steve. Steve looked decidedly uncomfortable.

The girl stomped on his shoe.

Holding back a yelp, Steve quickly agreed, "Yep, yep. History report. Yep, because we *lovvvve* history."

Claire glared at the blonde for his sarcastic comment before stomping on his foot again. He whimpered, 'Why' but she merely ignored him, turning her smile back in Jack's direction. He didn't like it … it was a

politician's smile.

"Yes, history. We were writing about … bridges …in town. Ones older than say the seventies like … the Holland Transit Bridge," said the girl, her smile forced.

'Jimbo! Don't let go of my hand!'

'I can't hold on! Jack! Jaaaaccckkkk!'

Jack blinked quickly, the memory flashing in his mind along with endless visions of glowing stones in the dark. That's where he had lost Jimbo … under the Holland Transit Bridge. These children … they weren't children, were they? No, no. They were those skinwalkers. They had finally decided they had had enough of him!

Grabbing an umbrella from the stand next to the door, Jack attacked. He jabbed the umbrella at the two tricksters causing them both to bark in surprise and trip backward. He then popped open the umbrella, driving the two of them even farther from the door and off-balance. Then, one hanging on the wall above the umbrella stand, Jack grabbed an iron horseshoe and threw it at the boy.

There was a dull *thunk* as it hit the teenager in the forehead, causing him to yelp and fall completely off the deck and into the grass. Claire immediately put her hands up in a show of surrender.

"We didn't mean any trouble. We-we just had some questions. We can leave and we won't come back," she tried to reason, her glance shifting between a groaning Steve to the aging man with the umbrella.

Shaking his head, Jack ground out, "Pick up the gaggletack. Pick it up now."

"Gaggle-tack. I-I don't know what you are taking ab-"

"The *horseshoe*! Pick it up!" he growled, stalking closer to the teenagers on the yard.

"O-oh okay," said Claire with a squeak, awkwardly shuffling over Steve. She then picked it up, stared at the strange carvings on it, before showing it to the madman.

Jack stared at her critically and then the horseshoe. He then nodded towards Steve, growling, "Poke him with it … just to make sure it touched him long enough. On his skin."

Blinking rapidly, Claire swallowed and nodded stiffly. She then leaned down and poked Steve in the cheek with the horseshoe, looking up at the man like he was crazy. God, Jack hated that look.

Sighing, he lowered the umbrella somewhat, “Okay, you two aren’t skinchangers. That doesn’t explain why you asked about that bridge though or how you know my history with it. Speak up and tell me what you know.”

Cringing away, Claire relented, “We are trying to help are two missing classmates, Jim and Toby. We think they were taken by trolls. And then we found your police report and it mentioned what sounded like a blue troll and a secret passage and we … just wanted to help them. The adults won’t believe us … Someone has to do something and that has to be us.”

Where her voice was panicked at first, it gained a sense of steel and resolve. She was a fighter and Jack respected that. Afraid of the dark he might have become, but he still had searched that bridge for years afterward… looking for a sign of his brother in the daylight. He never found anything in the light, but the things he did find had given him a sense that there was another world below their feet.

Closing the umbrella, the greying man shook his head, “Come into the house. I’ll grab some ice for the boy. We’ll discuss this … away from prying eyes.”

A bag of frozen peas later, Jack sat across the two teenagers at the kitchen table with a deep-set frown. Claire had told them of the troll chase through town and the troll fight in the canal … and how they thought Jim was still alive. Every time she said that, *that Jim was still alive*, he felt his heart clench for it felt like she was talking about his brother and not Barbara’s boy.

He had little hope for their plan to get under the bridge in a troll disguise, and the adult in him wanted to tell them to stop, but another part of himself envied them. They would be doing what he never could. They were confronting the monsters in the dark. He had merely chosen to forget it. At least that was what his psychologist always said about his missing weeks.

“So, that’s our plan. I know it sounds crazy, but we have to try. There is only one problem,” continued Claire, ignoring Steve’s groaning noise as he adjusted the frozen bag of peas on his face. “We don’t know how to open the portal under the bridge. We were hoping that

maybe you knew since … you were there. We think it has something to do with this glowing stone and were hoping you knew something, like a back way in or out since … you obviously escaped."

Clair then showed him a zoomed in picture of a glowing stone that was obviously drawing a circle under the bridge and opening the portal.

'Its so dark … I'm scared.'

Leaning back in his chair, blinking back the hazy memory of searching out glowing crystals in the dark, Jack sighed, "I didn't escape that night. I don't remember much of anything honestly after being thrown in the cave. I just remember the blue troll carrying me home right before sunrise and leaving me on my parents' porch. He was bleeding and panting. I tried to ask about Jim, my little brother, but he was already disappearing into the woods. They never found a trace of Jim and no one believed me when I told them about what happened under the bridge."

Eyes going wide, Claire sat back, eyes shifting back and forth as she looked for the right words to say. All that could escape her was, "I'm sorry."

"I am as well," groaned Jack as he rose to his feet, heading out of the room to only coming back a few seconds later with a small box, "I found this in the yard a few days after I was returned, near the woods where the troll disappeared. I suspected what it was, but … I had decided it was too late to even try. It was like a part of me already knew … Jimbo was gone."

With that, he opened the box. There were some oddities like a little red pointed hat, a stone tooth, and a little orange crystal. Its glow was the same as the one used to open the portal. It was barely the size of a rubber eraser and had obviously broken off of a large piece.

Pulling out the small stone, staring at its glow for a moment, Jack slowly presented it to Claire. "Here. Do what I never got the chance to. Save Jim. It might not be my Jim, but I don't want you to feel the same regret I have. It's best to have done something then to have done nothing at all because evil triumphs when good people do nothing."

Claire, accepting the stone in the palm of her hands, could only nod with the reminder of why they were doing this: they were good people.

…

Nomura kept finding her hand roaming up to her neck, feeling the bruises forming there while her lungs recalled how they had hungered for air. Bular had almost crushed her neck yesterday morning, blaming her for allowing the bridge piece to be taken. The only reason she was probably still alive was because he had thrown her into one of the crates … and she had shielded herself with the Fetch from said crate. Somehow, she had convinced him that they needed more changelings to get the bridge piece back.

She closed her eyes at the memory, sighing, knowing that she had basically condemned another baby to the fading light of the Darklands.

Changelings weren't supposed to love humans. They just weren't supposed to, but there was one human that all changelings secretly loved regardless of their standing or age. Everyone loved their familiar. How could you not? A changeling cut out their second heart and it was placed in that babe's chest. You could always check on them as well, watching them giggle and weep through any shiny surface. They were … innocent … and there was no doubt in any changeling's mind that that babe *unconditionally* loved them.

Releasing a shaky breath, she gathered herself before speaking with the goblins. They would have to grab the child and take him into the Darklands through the Fetch. The child's fate would then be sealed forever, to remain timeless in that dark place.

Pressing any traitorous thoughts away, blaming the reintroduction of Draal for such thoughts in the first place, she stalled in her lonely echoing steps across the museum's marble floor, right below where the goblins usually build their nest. It seemed all of them were still asleep. She'd have to send them tonight to grab the child when the parents went to bed.

Tilting her head towards the shadow, she saw a pair of glowing eyes and immediately knew it was Stricklander. Her words were barely above a whisper as she spoke and yet somehow, they echoed, "You could have at least verbally defended me."

Stricklander, limping out of the shadow, folded his hands behind his back. He stared at her for a moment, before stating softly, "And have us both die? How will that help the changelings?"

Frowning, grinding her teeth in her human form, she turned her head

away, “It wouldn’t … Do you at least have a plan for how to get the bridge piece back? A new changeling will be of help in time, but I doubt they will have the sway to get us the missing piece”

“Unlike you Nomura, I plan ahead,” said Strickler, transforming into his human form as he stepped into the light of the setting sun. It would be dark soon.

“And what plan is that? Exposing our spy in Trollmarket? And what if they fail?” she asked angrily, crossing her hands over her chest as she shifted most of her weight to one leg. “If Kanjigar finds out there is even *one* of our kind down there, he will stop at nothing to check every troll that steps foot into that place. We’ll never get another insider.”

“Kanjigar is driven, but I know one thing that will get the better of him. One thing that can even get through Trollmarket’s defenses,” said Walter with a smirk, the changeling showing off a ring with a large yellow stone to the woman.

Zelda Nomura raised a brow. “I doubt tacky jewelry is going to be of much help here, Strickler.”

Waving his hand away, a faint yellow light seeming to follow after the ring, Strickler smiled, “It’s so much more than a ring, Nomura. It will get to the *soul* of the situation if you will. Now, I need to make a brief trip. I hope to not be gone too long.”

And with that, Strickler walked away with a smirk on his lips leaving Nomura more than a little confused.

Chapter End Notes

> Yay, an update. Also, I never intended to bring Jack into the tale, but I also liked the idea that he was the only survivor if the Milk Carton Epidemic. So, it’s the exact opposite of the book where Jim Sturges was apparently the only survivor. Also, we get a huge hint of who’ll be showing up next. I can’t wait. ^.~

Feeed Meeeee

Chapter Notes

> Deneb Crimes/Quassim made the fanart for this chapter: https://twitter.com/suneat3r/status/1097157623747624962

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was a stumbling noise and then a groan like someone had just run into a wall. A second later, Jim stumbled into the living area of the dwell looking like he had just escaped a tornado. His hair had a cowlick and there was drool on the side of his chin. Toby, sitting at the dwell's small table was playing Penuckle with one of the town guards.

"It's alive!" joked Toby as he waved to the one remaining chair at the stone table, inviting Jim to sit down.

"Morning Toby," said Jim as he plopped down, yawning again. "What time is it? Has Kanjigar come by for his daily interrogation?"

Toby frowned, "Of course, he has … you've been asleep for three days."

"What?!" barked Jim, the sleep disappearing from his eyes immediately. "How? Why didn't anyone wake me up?"

Chuckling, Tony smirked, "I'm kidding. You've been asleep all day though. Like sixteen hours or something. The sun's already setting."

Running a hand through his hair, confused, Jim merely grumbled, "Oh, that's odd. I don't usually oversleep like that."

"Yeah, I told Kanjigar that a few hours ago when the sun went down. He actually thought you were dead until you started snoring and told him the ladybugs were in the dryer. Blinky said that magic can be exhausting and to just let you rest. So, they let you be. Blinky told the guards that once you were up, you could come to the library for magic lessons."

Wiping his face, trying not to blush at the thought of talking in his sleep, Jim swallowed, "Okay … is there anything to eat?"

Toby shrugged, before almost adding excitedly, "We can get some

mystery meat and mutant mushrooms kabobs on the way over like usual? Or we can try the living jello-slimes today. They look cool. Or- Or we can try banshee milk. Apparently, it actually screams when you drink it."

Jim merely groaned and smacked his head into the stone table. "Ouch."

Patting Jim on his back, Toby added, "Well, at least the guards haven't tried feeding us rocks again."

…

"Concentrate, Young Jim. Magic has a lot to do with the caster's will," said Blinky, his excitement almost palpable as he stood next to Jim and the pot of dirt. Sweat was already dripping down the teenager's face. He didn't know if it was because he was concentrating so hard … or because of the jello-slimes they ate. He honestly couldn't tell if it was alive or dead when he swallowed it. Toby didn't seem sick though. So, it was probably from trying to use magic.

Hands finally dropping to his sides, the amulet around his neck glinting as if irritated, Jim flopped back into a stone chair, "This isn't working Blinky. Why am I even trying to do this? What does *making a plant grow* have to do with magic lessons? I get the healing thing. That's useful, but can't I get a magic sword or something? I don't know how botany is going to help me."

"Botany is one of the core skills of earth-based magic users, Young Jim. It is important in the creation of potions and polyjuices as well. Vendel is even considering sending for a spriggan to come and teach you more about the uses of botany. He will teach you what he knows, of course, but he still has his roles in Troll Market," said Blinky sympathetically as he patted Jim's shoulder.

Sitting there, exhausted, Jim wiped a hand down his face. "Spriggan? What's a spriggan? And what about normal school?"

"A spriggan is a cousin to trolls. They are quite in tune with nature and plants … given they are part plant," said Blinky with a shrug. "As for human school, there is not yet a unanimous decision as to when it will be safe enough to allow you alone outside of Troll Market."

Jim's face morphed into one of irritation. How long did they think they were going to keep him down here?! Yes, he understood that Kanjigar wanted to keep Jim's knowledge away from the likes of

Bular, but he had a life. He had a family he had to get back to!

Rising to his feet, his teeth grinding, Jim decided to not take it out on Blinky. He was actually glad that Blinky was one of his teachers. It was at least one of his past connections that were reforming with little effort, and he didn't want to strain those platonic feelings. He'd … just learn magic faster. He'd prove to Kanjigar that he could fight his own battles and if learning to make a seedling grow was a required part of his new curriculum, then he would do it.

Rising to his feet, his jaw grinding as he held back his growing ire, Jim stood back over the pot. He was angry at it. He was angry at Kanjigar and Troll Market and Daylight and Bular and Strickler and … he was sick of it all!

Hands over the seed again, all those feelings in the back of his mind like bubbling lava, energy started to spark around his fingertips. His amulet's stone, unnoticed by him, also started to glow red.

Blinky, seeing this, quickly tried to interject, "Umm, Jim. How about a quick respite? Yes? I think it would be very beneficial to your state of mind."

"I'm doing this Blinky," said Jim, gritting his teeth from the strain. "I'm going to show Kanjigar and Vendel and anyone else who questions me, that I can take care of myself. I am practically an adult. I should be able to go home and fight my own battles. And if learning to grow a plant is the only way I can do that, I am going to grow this stupid plant!"

It was with that outburst that the pot suddenly exploded, sending dirt and clay shards everywhere. Jim barked in surprise and quickly brought up his hands to protect his face from the shrapnel. Blinky wasn't so lucky, getting a face full of dirt.

"Young Jim!" cried Blinky in surprise as he tried to rub the dirt out of his many eyes. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," coughed the teenager, lowering his arms to look at his hands. He tried not to wince when he noticed that he had gotten a few shards in his hands. It was at times like these that he missed his armor. Luckily, none of them seemed too deep.

"Just a little blood," added Jim, moving to remove the shards. He could only frown as he pulled out each clay shard, little droplets of blood falling into the remains of the earth.

Still rubbing his eyes, Blinky finally was able to see somewhat. He immediately pulled in a panicked breath as he watched the seer work.

Jim stalled as well, surprised, “What? It’s just a scratch Blinky.”

“Move away from the pot, Jim,” said the troll carefully as he put a pair of his hands up in a calming motion. “Don’t get any blood on the seed.”

“Why?” said Jim, going still.

“Because,” said the troll, his voice gaining a panicked tone as he explained, “You might accidentally perform *blood magic*! One of the darker arts! It’s dangerous, unpredictable, and without the proper tools, impossible to control!”

“What?!” said Jim, now jerking his hand away. Unfortunately, he had moved his hand too quickly causing droplets to scatter across the surrounding floor … and right onto the seedling he had been trying to grow. The effect was almost instantaneous, the seed glowing a dark red before the dirt and floor all around it seemed to rumble. Then, for a moment all was still, before green and red roots exploded everywhere. Some were as thick as branches.

Blinky barely had time to yell in surprise before he was suddenly thrown against a wall by a collection of giant roots. Jim, in turn, rolled on top of a stone desk just in time to have it uplifted by the growing roots and thrown out the main entrance. Jim screamed the whole way out, surfing on the top of the desk like a surfboard. A second later, he was tossed into the stone street skidding along like he was on some type of sled as Blinky’s books and belongings were strewn everywhere … including on top of Jim’s head.

“Ouch, ouch, ouch!” cried Jim as he got off of the desktop and tried to dodge the heavier books that were falling from the sky.

“Jim! What’s going on?” shouted Toby as he jogged down the street towards the library, two of the town’s guards behind him. “We could feel the rumble all the way down the street. What happened?!”

Stooping under a stone overhang as books and other oddities rained down on it, Jim yelled out, “Stay back, Tobes!

The female troll guard, Lump, grabbed Toby just in time to ignore an entire shelf of troll-lore from falling on his head. She then patted the whelp on said head. Trekk, the other troll guard, rushed over to Jim.

He was ready to drag the frail whelp off somewhere he was less likely to be squished.

“I’m fine,” said Jim as he waved off the town guard. “Blinky’s trapped in there with all the roots though. Please help him.”

Rolling his eyes, Trekk grabbed his axe and started towards the library entrance, books and other debris falling on him. The large troll paid it little mind as he lifted his axe and brought it down on one of the giant roots blocking the entrance. The squeal that followed was *horrible*. Trekk didn’t even have time to look surprised before the root reared up and swung at him. He went flying like a flicked insect, slamming into Lump as he went and knocking them both down into a lower tier of Troll Market.

Jim and Toby both shared a shocked look before Toby laughed nervously, “They’re probably fine. ”

The ex-Trollhunter was about to agree but stalled when movement near the library caused him to turn his head away from Toby. Jim’s eyes couldn’t help but widen as a collection of roots crept outside of the doorway and then seemed to pull. Slowly, what looked like a collection of jagged spines or teeth exited, followed by a red, bulbous head. If he had to describe it at all, Jim would say it looked like a giant Venus Flytrap. It had to be larger than Aaarrrgghh and that wasn’t counting the vines.

Toby, watching Jim’s face morph into one of horror, turned his head slowly to stare at the plant creature as it flopped completely out of the doorway. Said creature sniffed the air for a moment as if perplexed by its surroundings. It even seemed ready to slither off in the other direction when suddenly it seemed to have caught a scent: its head snapped in the two humans’ direction. It took a few more deep intakes, its nostrils flaring before it slowly cracked its teeth open … and promptly split Blinky out.

The trainer merely groaned, muttering something in Trollish as he tried to wipe drool out of his eyes.

That done, the plant turned its attention back to the humans, its vine-like tongues wiggling as it harshly grumbled, “Feeed meeeee.”

It then started to flop forward like a seal on land. It was like it was confused about how to move, but it was quickly learning how to slither its viney limbs forward … And it was getting faster.

“Umm, Toby. I think maybe we should run,” said Jim, once again missing the weight and protection of the Daylight armor.

“You don’t have to tell me twice. I don’t want to be in the sequel of Little Shop of Horrors,” said Toby as they started to run in the other direction. “The fat kid always goes first, Jim! The fat kid always goes first!”

…

Kanjigar had been unable to rest after hiding the bridge piece last night. Though trolls nowhere required the amount of rest living flesh did when there was a Hearthstone present, it was still recommended for sick or weary trolls. He was sure Vendel had noticed and would send Aaarrrgghh after him sooner or later for some house arrest.

He just couldn't calm his mind though. He just knew that Bular would stop at nothing to get into Troll Market now. He also had a sinking feeling that Troll Market might already be infiltrated given that Seer Jim had mentioned changelings more than once. There was also a fetch to find and he had to check on Young Jim’s mother, Bar-ba-ra, as he had vowed to. Furthermore, he also had to find time to train with Draal.

Sighing, his shoulders feeling heavy, Kanjigar struggled with what to do first. He even stalled in the middle of an intersection in the market and stood there, already feeling breathless. His back was even stinging with a reminder that he was still healing. He wanted to dismiss his armor … but he couldn’t afford to show weakness right now.

“You thinking too much,” came a warm jest as Aarrggghhh came up beside him.

Deflating slightly, Kanjigar nodded, “Perhaps, but what else am I to do? There are too many pieces, too many stones in play, and I cannot gather them all in my hands. It’s as if I’m dealing with sand … and it’s all straining through my fingers.”

The blue troll then looked down at his hands. He had always thought that his hands were perfectly sized. Now, they seemed too small and incapable of the task ahead. He never imagined that he would ever have to face Gunmar, but it was starting to seem more and more possible with the bridge being collected. Vendel had said that seers only came during troubled times.

“Friends. Help you,” said Aarrggghhh, bumping his shoulder against

the Trollhunter in a friendly manner.

“I know, old friend. I know,” said Kanjigar as he pulled a tired smile onto his face. “Now, Blinky and you are rarely separated. So, I take it you’ve been sent to fetch me for something?”

Chuckling, Aaarrrgghh added, “Vendel knows. You did not return. To dwell. Today.”

Shaking his head minutely, the blue troll grumbled, “Of course, he does. I swear that troll is a seer himself the way he acts. Anything else?”

“Jim. Finally awake. At Blinky’s,” added Aaarrrgghh, fulfilling the request to let the Trollhunter know when the young seer was awake. He hated badgering the boy, but the seer said he would release information about the future whenever he saw fit. And if that meant asking the boy every day, then he would ask every day.

Nodding, having at least a direction to head, the blue troll started walking with the ex-general. “So, what lesson will be the seer’s first?”

Shrugging, Aaarrrgghh stated, “Make seedling grow. Something not dangerous.”

“Well, that’s better than I feared. Blinky can be … overzealous sometimes,” said Kanjigar, smiling at Aaarrrgghh’s chuckle. “Tell me, do you know what lesson Vendel plans on starting with?”

Aaarrrgghh rumbled for a moment. “Maybe stonecutting?”

Kanjigar nodded his head. That would be useful, especially for a wizard basically being taught troll magics. He was going to voice that very opinion when suddenly he heard the increasingly common squeak of shoes followed by a gasping noise. A second later, in the crossroads ahead, he watched Jim run by as well as a panting Tobias.

He raised a brow. He knew Jim couldn’t escape Troll Market with Vendel’s band. So, it seemed odd for the two to be running, especially the pudgy one. Then again, the two whelps had made it somewhat of a game to hide from the market’s guards.

“Should we get them?” asked Aaarrrgghh, turning to look at Kanjigar.

About to nod, a slithering noise interrupted the Trollhunter as multiple green roots suddenly slithered into the intersection followed

by a large, bulbous, red head with far too many teeth. The two trolls' mouths fell open in surprise, the giant plant creature seeming to quickly catch up to the boys.

"Yes, yes, we should most defiantly go get them," finally said Kanjigar, summoning his sword to his hand as he ran forward and around the corner. Aaarrrgghh, following after, only got to the intersection in time to duck. Kanjigar, having been whipped away by a root, went flying over the large troll's head. Aaarrrgghh could only wince as the current Trollhunter bounced a few times before sliding to a stop on his back in the street.

"You. Okay?!" cried Aaarrrgghh back at the Trollhunter.

One hand rising to rub his helmet, Kanjigar waved the ex-general off with his second hand as if telling him: *yes, yes, I am, but could you get the number of that truck that hit me?*

Turning his attention back to the plant creature as it turned a corner, troll citizens starting to run and scream as it entered a more populated area, Aaarrrgghh roared and started after the chaos.

…

Up ahead, Toby was gasping as they ran. "J-jim. W-where are … we … running."

Starting to feel exhausted as well, probably from the huge amount of magic he had accidentally poured into that thing, Jim gasped, "I wanted to go … to the river … but it kept … cutting us … off. So … to the Hero's F-forge. W-we can catch … it in … the gears."

Stumbling somewhat, Toby whined, "I … don't know … if … I can … make it. Go on … without … me. Tell Nana … I … loved … her … pie. I … really … loved … her … pie."

If this wasn't such a dire circumstance, Jim might have laughed. Instead, he slowed down and tried to keep Toby on his feet. "Come on … Tobes. We are … almost … there. S-stick near … the weapons … rack. The … floor … will move."

A few of the town guards tried to assist, but they were all smacked aside. Trolls, merchant stalls, and anything else that dared get in the way went flying as the plant kept on its rampage. If it was merely hungry for flesh or Jim's magic, neither of the boys wanted to find out, but it obviously didn't have a taste for trolls.

Finally, the two boys were on the bridge that led to the forge, gasping like water-starved fish. Yet, just when they were about to cross the threshold and slam the gates closed, a vine whipped out and grabbed Toby by a leg, ripping him away from Jim.

“Toby! No!” cried Lake as he stumbled back after him, only to have the pudgy teenager lifted up too high to grasp.

Watching his best friend being drawn towards that hungry maw, Jim immediately looked around. He didn’t have Daylight but refused to be helpless. “I’ll save you! Don’t worry!”

Stumbling over to a weapons rack, he glanced around before picking a sword that looked like his Daylight. He immediately abandoned it, the sword almost too heavy for him to swing. It had been made for trolls after all and Daylight had been made of literal light.

Blaming his loss of muscle mass for the issues, Jim reached for a shorter sword. It still felt heavy in his grip, but he could work with this.

Turning his head, Jim’s breath caught. Toby was already being lifted over the plant monster’s mouth like he was nothing but a tasty mouse. Toby, a terrified look on his face, gave one last horrified glance at Jim … and then the boy was dropped right into that open maw.

It was almost slow motion for Jim. The journey had barely begun, and he had already fucked up again. Toby was going to die … because of his selfishness. Yet, a roar sounded, echoing over the forge as a blur of green suddenly launched itself into the plant monster, thrusting it further into the forge and causing its jaw to swing off center before it could swallow Toby. The teenager tumbled into the roots at the creature’s base instead, his legs kicking uselessly. Aaarrrgghh again roared in rage and started ripping at whatever viney limbs drew too close as he made his way to Tobias. He tore through the magical mishap like he was weeding a garden until he finally fought his way to the center where he promptly punched the creature in the jaw and pulled Tobias from the roots.

“Wingman!” cried Toby thankfully, remembering the nickname Jim had told him. If Aaarrrgghh acknowledged the strange name, he didn’t show it as he protected Toby from any incoming roots.

The plant was enraged, snapping and hissing, as it tried to rip Toby from the stone beast. Aaarrrgghh just kept ripping and blocking any roots that drew too near until the plant monster had had enough. It

lifted half of its limbs up and then swiped at Aaarrrgghh's form. Seeing what was coming, the large troll barely had time to encircle the teenager before the roots smacked him across the forge. He hit hard, leaving cracks in the wall before he slid down and fell into one of the weapons racks. Even from here, Jim could see that Aaarrrgghh was disoriented.

Watching Toby pat Aaarrrgghh's cheek to try and wake him, Jim decided that he had started this … so he was going to end it.

"Hey! Hey," cried the mage-in-training as he swiped at the small limbs near him, nicking a few and gaining the plant's attention. "Over here ugly. Yeah, look at me! I'm the one you want."

"Jim, no!" cried Toby from across the forge, but Jim already had the plant following him to the center of the room and away from Aaarrrgghh and Toby.

"Activate the forge, Toby!" cried Jim in turn, pointing to one of the stone buttons as he dodged a root. "Right there. Hit it! Hit it!"

Shaking his head, Toby yelled back, "But you said there were blades and everything. I can't do –"

"Now, Toby!" shouted Jim back, before he added more carefully. "… Trust me."

His lips became a tight line, Toby shared a gaze across the forge with his best friend … and then slowly nodded. He stumbled to one of the forge's stone controls and slammed down on it. The forge at first was still and then there was a grumble as the floor started moving, blades swinging like pendulums and wayward guillotines.

Jim barely jumped out of the way as one blade came up from the cracking floor, catching the roots that were reaching for the boy. The creature immediately squealed as its long-reaching roots were tugged, cut and damaged by the moving forge. It tried to pull its leafy limbs back in but the damaged was already being done … and it *blamed* Jim.

Barking in surprise as the teeth-line jaw snapped at him, Jim tried to jump up onto a rising platform. He had barely gotten onto it before it started tilting sideways. Cursing is luck and already tired form, the ex-Trollhunter started running up the incline barely grabbing the next moving piece. The plant monster, though spewing its plant juices as it went, seemed to have fewer issues crawling up than Jim would have liked. It was already catching up to him, green limbs trying to snatch

at his legs.

“No, no, no!” barked Jim as he continued upward towards the Soothsayer using his borrowed sword to chop at any vines that managed to grab him. Things weren’t going exactly as planned. The plant wasn’t being ripped to shreds quite as fast as Jim thought it would … and he was almost to the top.

“Gah!” cried the teenager when his creation finally got a good grip on him. It immediately opened its mouth showing off its sharp planty teeth and pink tongue.

“This just isn’t my week,” muttered Jim to himself, readying himself to be dropped. He really hoped it swallowed its food whole and if the acid didn’t kill him, maybe he would be able to cut his way out.

“Young Jim!” came a cry from the entrance of the Hero’s Forge, Kanjigar sliding to a halt as a shocked expression took over his features. “I’m coming.”

The large troll then slammed the control again, the forge’s gears grinding as it stalled and swayed in the opposite direction, sinking back into the floor. The plant, jarred by the change in direction, fell into the main tier where the Soothsayer was located. Jim hit the stone floor hard and scrambled to get his sword. Once in hand, he swung it at the vine holding him in place. The plant monster squealed, and the boy was released.

Shakily getting to his feet, that maw opening wide like it was going to dive-bomb him, Jim swung his sword down at the plant’s head, electricity running through his fingers. He didn’t know if it was merely his will or some kind of survival instinct, but the blade turned blue and arced forward like a wave. It slashed deeply sending green goo everywhere, the plant howling one last time before it flopped onto the stone floor, its many limbs going still.

The floor finally folding completely in, Jim was greeted by a worried looking Kanjigar.

“See … I can fight my own battles,” said Jim, gasping as he leaned onto the sword he had chosen, the blue light fading. Oh boy, he needed to start practicing again or something. Noodle arms sucked.

Kanjigar, looking over the boy as if counting his limbs, stepped closer and with a single powerful swipe cut the plant in half. It flopped one last time, its viney limbs flailing before it was consumed in by light.

Most of its form disappeared while its remaining roots tumbled into the lava pit below.

Daylight being placed on his back, the Troll Hunter loomed over Jim with a deep-set frown. “I can see that you nearly got yourself killed, Seer Jim. That sword was ill-fitted for you and if you hadn’t been able to summon your magic, it likely would have gotten you killed.”

“Well,” said Jim, standing up straight even though he felt exhausted. “I’m out of practice and this sword is heavier than … mine.”

Sighing, shaking his head, Kanjigar dispersed his armor and placed a hand on Jim’s shoulder in what was probably meant to be comforting, “Young Jim … I know that you are adamant that you are not a seer, but what you just did has me weary. Vendel did say seers have a habit of getting themselves killed while trying to use skills that they had never acquired.”

Jim was at first flabbergast, dropping the sword. He was at a loss for words. So, the Trollhunter continued before the young mage could become verbally upset.

“But, I can tell that you have the mental will to wield one,” he added as he leaned forward and picked up what would be a short-sword by troll standards, handing it back to the boy, “Which is why I think, after your magic lessons of course, that you should come and train with Draal or myself from time to time. If I am not answering a call, I can usually be found in the forge. It would also teach Draal patience to show someone else the basics.”

Jim, now gripping the short sword tightly in his two hands, was visibly shaking. He obviously was upset and Kanjigar hated reprimanding any of the whelps in the market for this very reason.

“I am not a seer!” finally barked Jim as he threw the short sword away, the blade skidding across the stone floor. He agreed with Toby, it couldn’t be proven either way, but he still hated that all the older trolls treated him like an unstable seer.

His voice breaking, almost begging, the teenager added, “I am *Jim*. I’m *James Lake Jr*. I’m a person. Those moments were real for me. *Please* … why can’t any of you see me.”

Surprised at the boy’s reaction, expecting more anger, Kanjigar struggled for a reply. Jim … didn’t want to wait for one. He was already running around the large troll and towards the exit. Toby,

seeing this, gave Kanjigar a hurt look before he apologized to Aaarrrgghh and rushed after Jim.

Already feeling guilty, the Trollhunter wilted somewhat as Aaarrrgghh

stumbled over to him, shaking his great green head.

Kanjigar couldn't help but grumble, “I feel like I’m raising whelps all over again, Aaarrrgghh. I can never say the right things.”

Aaarrrgghh hummed as if trying to think of a reply. It was almost a godsend when there was a tromp of heavy troll-feet, Draal sliding into the forge. The ex-general gave Kanjigar a smile before almost cheekily replied, “You did okay. With the first.”

“Father … what happened? I saw the seer and his friend just running by,” said Draal, slowing to a walk as he came before the two other trolls. “I heard some kind of plant beast was after the seer. Did you slay it?”

Nodding, waving his arm at the few vines that remained. “Well, I finished it off, but Seer Jim had a hand in it. Which, since you are here, how do you feel about teaching Young Jim the basics of swordplay? I fear that our young guest is growing more and more distress with his confines. His new magic lessons are not enough to occupy his time … or his heavy mind, apparently.”

Looking back in the direction where Jim had run, Draal frowned. It wasn’t that he disliked the young seer, he didn’t really know him, but it still unnerved him that Jim talked to him in such a personable way at the waterfall. It was as if he knew him.

Nonetheless, if his father thought it was a good idea, he didn’t see a point in denying the request.

“Of course, father. If you think it best. One should always review the basics,” he said simply.

“Yes, the basics,” parroted Kanjigar as he looked at the gooey green remains around them.

Blinky, tripping into the forge a second later, goo and drool still coating his entire body, squeaked in distress, “That was an unpleasant experience. Has anyone seen Young Jim? I fear our lesson strayed from plant growing and into the ... darker arts.”

Chapter End Notes

I fear I've watched too many dark musicals in my time. It's made my head weird. Anyway, this chapter was fun. Blinky is super unlucky and Kanjigar is just too formal … but at least he tries. ^.^;

Give Him Back

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How long will you be gone?” asked Barbara as Walter sat down next to her on the couch.

The changeling wanted to bid her goodbye before heading on his journey to find Angor Rot. He was sure Jim had something to do with this whole mess, but he had become somewhat fond of Barbara during the investigation. He’d do what he could for the foolish boy if only for her, but first, he had to look out for himself.

Cupping her hand in his, Walter looked at the yellow stone on his finger before he smiled sadly at the frazzled woman. “Not long, Barbara. I’m sorry to leave you in such a state, but … its family business. I wouldn’t leave you alone during this trying time otherwise.”

Gripping his hand, her red-rimmed eyes seeming to sink, she swallowed dryly, “I understand, Walter. Family comes first. Will … you call me at least?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of doing otherwise,” he said as he rose to his feet, Barbara standing with him.

Even with her form weighed down in sorrow like this, she was still a beautiful woman. So, when she walked him to the door, he couldn’t help but turn to her and ask, “Would it be impromptu of me to ask … for a goodbye kiss? It would grant me a safe journey.”

Despite the sorrow around her, Barbara seemed to perk up. Blinking her eyes rapidly as if indecision, part of her guilty for finding a moment of happiness for herself while Jim was missing, she somehow met his gaze again. She was thirsty for something besides the sorrow that consumed her days. “Yes, I would like that.”

Wrapping his arms around her, the changeling pulled her close, cupping one of her cheeks as he kissed her. It wasn’t a wild heated embrace. It was soft and patient, like old lovers that were promising to meet again.

Walter would have liked to stay in her grasp longer, to enjoy the smell

of her hair and the touch of her hand on his back, but now was a delicate time … and so he pulled away. They stared at each other for a moment longer, as if both now recognized the step they had just taken towards a relationship. The moment might have lasted forever if movement outside the window hadn't caused Strickler to turn his head.

He stared out at the darkness, his eyes becoming slits.

Slowly letting her go in case someone like Bular was watching, Strickler reached for the door, "Thank you, Barbara. I will see you soon."

Stepping outside, he waved to her one last time as he made his way to the car. He scanned the still and darken neighborhood for any signs of movement. Not seeing anything, his eyes flickered yellow for a moment so that he could see in the dark. Immediately, a bush twitched … a squirrel running up a nearby tree.

Sighing slightly, glad it wasn't the likes of Bular, the changeling got into his car and drove away. Unbeknown to him, a few seconds later a pair of moose-like horns came out of said bush only to promptly be pulled back down by a spiky blue arm.

"Didn't you see that?! Don't go up there you fool," growled Draal as he motioned in the direction Walter's car had went.

BaaAch, watching the red light of the taillight's fade and leave the two trolls in darkness again, nodded, "Yes, it was barbaric how they squished their faces together. I was sure one was going to eat the other's face in a show of dominance."

Draal stalled and then huffed air out of his nostrils before promptly agreeing, "Yes, the face smooching was … gross, but I was talking about the male that left. His eyes glowed before he got into the motor vehicle! Seer Jim was right, a changeling is trying to woo Bar-Ba-Ra. It is a good thing father sent us to check."

Snorting, BaaAch snickered, "Only because he couldn't come himself. Your father was caught by Vendel, yes?"

Shrugging, Draal admitted, "Vendel … was cross with him. He said Jim's healing was no substitute for rest. Plus, he needed to check the library for any more plant monsters."

"Mmm, plant monsters," hummed BaaAch having been forced to help

clean up the forge.

Nodding in agreement, the blue troll added, “Yes, the vines were quite tasty once it was dead. Its almost a shame Vendel will not be allowing Jim to make any more.”

BaaAch chuckled softly, the two young trolls stalling when two police cars suddenly rushed by the block, red and blue light reflecting off the house’s nearby. In fact, they could hear even more sirens wailing in the distance.

Frowning, BaaAch rose up slightly and tried to glance into the distance. “What do you suppose has the human’s law beaters in a tizzy this evening?”

Shrugging, Draal motioned back towards the woods. “Whatever it is, we best disappear before all the humans pop out of their dwells to watch. We do not want to be seen.”

…

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” whispered Claire to herself as she pulled on a dark pair of pants and shirt, the alarm clock reflecting 10:45 PM. “I look like a cat burglar.”

Nonetheless, she continued getting dressed and packing her bag. The rest of the Creepslayerz needed her. Mare was getting strangled by threads and Darci needed a second pair of hands to literally make the second pair of hands for the disguise. The faster they got it done, the sooner they could save Jim and Toby.

Throwing her bag over her shoulder, she was about to open her window and shimmy down the gutter when she heard a bang from the room next to hers: Enrique’s room. She stilled, thinking that her father was checking her baby brother because that might lead him to check on her as well.

Quickly shuffling over to her bed, Claire crawled under her sheets and pulled the blanket up high to hide her fully-dressed state. When she didn’t hear the tell-tale squeak of floorboards or departing footsteps, she frowned. If dad wasn’t in Enrique’s room, then who was?

Worry suddenly covering her features, she crawled out of bed and left her pack, opening her door just an inch to peek out. Everything was still and dark … yet Enrique was now fussing, and something had just fallen over.

Carefully opening her door, she tiptoed across the hall to her brother's room, peaking in. She immediately stalled when she caught a blurry shape that was not supposed to be in there. There, over her brother's crib, was some kind of ... *creature*. Its features were barely distinguished by the nightlight in her brother's room, but even she could tell it had just jumped into the crib, wrapping her baby brother up. It even shushed Enrique before sticking a binky into his mouth and picking him up. It then rocked him in its spindly arms before crawling out of the crib, heading to the window sill. In the moonlight … she could see it was a goblin.

"No!" cried Claire, busting into the room when she fully realized what she was seeing. "Put my baby brother down."

Turning its glinting eyes in the girl's direction, almost eerily, it hissed, "Waka … waka."

Then, before she could even blink, it was jumping out her brother's open window and onto the roof. Claire gasped in surprise and then was running towards the open window, basically throwing herself out of it and onto the roof. Those eerie eyes, already across the roof and to the edge, turned to her before the goblin growled and jumped off.

"No! Enrique!" screamed the teenager, caring little if her father heard her. She was already running across the roof to where the goblin had jumped. She immediately slid to a halt at the edge nearly knocking a shingle loose as her eyes scanned the dark yard below. And there, already a few yards away, a pair of eyes glowed at her before running towards the woods.

"Give him back!" she cried, getting her father's attention downstairs. The man had just looked out the window in time to see his daughter jump off the roof and fall into the bush below the window.

"Claire!" cried Javier, her father, as he ran to the window and threw it open. He barely had time to stick his head out of the window and watch his teenage daughter stumbled out of the bush. "What are you doing?! Why did you jump off the roof?"

"He grabbed Enrique!" she barked, stumbling into the yard despite the twinge of her left ankle. "I need to save him!"

Breath hitching, the true message of what she had just said hitting him, Javier called out, "Don't get near them. I'm coming, Claire. Claire!"

The girl did not wait for her father's plea, she was already running into the woods after her baby brother. She couldn't wait for her father. Trolls, evil ones at least, ate children and Enrique was so small. He still smelled like baby and his skin was so soft. The thought that anything would want to hurt him for that matter eat him, caused her to run faster despite the darkness. The moon was all she needed … and the cries of her sibling.

Even though the goblin was jumping through the woodland like a jackrabbit, Claire found herself catching up due to pure determination. Enrique's now desperate wails and kicking probably wasn't helping in the goblin's race and before she knew what she was doing, Claire was leaping towards the goblin.

The green beast cried in surprise as Claire jumped at it, causing both of them to go tumbling forward through the twigs and the leaves. Immediately, Claire started grabbing for her now screaming sibling caring little that the goblin was scratching at her face and hands.

"Give him back! Give him back!" she howled, listening to the blanket her brother was wrapped in tear. The blanket gave way with a hard tug and Enrique tumbled into her chest. She barely had time to wrap around his small body before the goblin was clawing at her shoulder and arm to get the babe, ripping at her shirt and revealed skin.

Screaming in surprise, Claire reached blindly for a weapon of any kind with her free arm and found a branch. She grabbed it and swung blindly as hard as she could. Somehow, as if luck was on her side, the branch hit true and sent the goblin flying. Claire, in turn, didn't wait to see if it died or not, she was already stumbling away.

And then she ran and stumbled and tripped. She ran until a flashlight was bearing down on her, her father nearly plowing over her as he met her in the woods and tugged her close. Then, wrapping one arm around his two children to serve almost as a physical barrier to everything in the dark, Javier swung the flashlight around wildly in the dark to see if Claire's pursuer was still nearby. When no one nor nothing came charging out of the dark, he looked back down at his daughter.

"What happen?! Claire, you're bleeding? Are you okay? Is Enrique okay?" he asked, the man's flashlight sending stray strands of light all around them as he looked over his daughter, his hand pulling away sticky from all the small cuts on her shoulder. Claire was unable to speak, still clutching her baby brother close as if she might lose him.

Javier gave the woods one more weary glance before he immediately picked Claire up in a bridal carry and jogged back to the safety of the house.

Claire wasn't sure if it was seconds or hours before her father placed her on the couch and begged for her to loosen her grip on her brother. It took everything in her to let him go, but she did. She … had almost lost him.

Unable to watch her father check her sibling for wounds, Claire was forced to look at her shaking hands. They were littered in scratches and cuts. Most seem superficial, but there were enough of them that her hands looked red. She had somehow kept ahold of Enrique. It was as if fate had intervened and allowed her to find her brother being taken at that exact moment.

Releasing a breath, still staring at her shaking hands, she was dimly aware that her father was now on the phone and that the sound of police sirens was now echoing in the distance.

Slowly, she pulled her hands into fists on her lap, caring little about the sting of her small open wounds. She was even more determined now to get into troll cave under the bridge. She wanted answers. She needed to know why anyone would want to steal her little brother and if something was going to try to do it again … she needed to know how to stop them.

Chapter End Notes

> Just a quick update, but important. Jim might not feel like he's changed much … but there is a ripple effect.

Horseshoe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s h-h-happening again, i-i-isn’t it?” stuttered Sergeant Ben Gulager as he stepped into Detective Scott’s office. “The k-kids are s-s-starting to go missing again.”

Detective Scott tried not to twitch as he looked up and met the other man’s gaze. He was exhausted. His head hurt and he had barely gotten three hours of sleep after going to the Nunez’s house last night. It was as if his perfect life plans were falling apart right in front of him. This town he had moved his family to was supposed to be safe. His daughter was supposed to be safe. He took a pay cut so his family would be *safe*.

Arcadia Oaks … wasn’t as peaceful as he thought it was.

Yes, there had always been rumors that sometimes the unwanted just *disappeared* around the quaint town, but there was never any real evidence. No reports. Then again, maybe that was because it was the unwanted that went missing. Question was, why were children being focused on suddenly?

“We don’t know if the Nunez’s near-kidnapping is related to James Lake Jr and Tobias Domzalski,” was all Detective Scott could say.

Sighing out of his nose, the older officer closed the door and sat in the chair before the obviously stressed detective. “B-but we d-do. H-history a-a-always repeats itself. T-the only question is h-how long w-we want it to k-keep that pattern.”

The detective’s shoulder’s sagged. He then closed his eyes and shook his head slowly as if not wanting to accept it. And yet, he surrendered to it. It hadn’t even been over a week and a third kid had almost gone missing.

“D-d-did C-Claire Nunez at least g-get a g-good look at the s-suspect?” asked the sergeant calmly.

Opening his eyes, his mind recalling all the cuts and scrapes that covered the girl’s features, Detective Scott could only mutter, “No, she didn’t. She said it was dark. Maybe he was wearing green, short. She

seemed … confused. Maybe she'll snap out of it in a few days. Then again, maybe she'll be like that kid that got away during the Milk Carton Epidemic: too traumatized to give an accurate description."

Frowning, his mind traveling to Jack Sturges, Ben nodded … a dread settling between them and what might befall their little community. It was only interrupted when the detective's phone gave a chirp, tell him he had a text.

Flipping his phone open, if only for a distraction, he smiled weakly when he noticed it was from his daughter, Darci. He wondered if she was going to fess up about stealing the last Snickers or not from his office. None the less, he was surprised with what the message requested.

"Daddy, can Claire come over after school and spend the night for a day or two. She doesn't feel safe in her own room. Mare or some of the other girls might come over as well for moral support," he said out loud, raising a brow. Not that he was surprised. Mr. and Mrs. Nunuz were throwing around the idea of taking their baby son to a distant relative to keep him safe. Mrs. Nunez was a political figure after all.

Ben merely stared at him before shrugging, "I can't-t blame the p-p-poor girl."

Pinching his nose bridge as he prayed for patience, the detective nodded, "It should be fine. Nothing is safer than a cops' home, right?"

With that, Detective Scott texted his daughter back, glad that he could help Claire Nunez in some way. Unbeknownst to him, there really weren't going to be any girls to protect in the coming nights. In fact, some of the 'girls' weren't even girls, but the girls of the Creepslayerz were sure they had a dress and wig in both Steve and Eli's size if Detective Scott became suspicious. After all, the Creepslayerz had a troll suit to finish and come hell or high water, nothing was going to keep Claire from her answers.

"Did he buy it?" said Mary as she leaned over Darci's shoulder, trying to see the texted reply. With two missing kids and one near-kidnapping last night, everyone's parents were now on high alert. Not all the Creepslayerz could sneak way to work on a troll costume and infiltration plans. So, Claire still at home, devised a plan. Everyone knew Darci's dad was a detective … so his house had to be one of the safest places in town. At least that's what everyone's parents probably believed.

Detective Scott, of course, would have to leave sometimes to deal with his open cases. Thus, the perfect place to finish their infiltration disguise and, when it was ready, sneak out for the night. If Mr. Scott caught them though … all of them were sure there would be house arrest in their future.

“Stop crushing me, Mare,” grumbled Darci as she read the reply. “Dad’s okay with it. We can stick the costume in the garage. He usually parks in the street anyway to deter crime. I’ll just call it a cosplay costume or something if he sees it.”

“Awesome!” said Eli, ignoring the look of passing students as he practically hopped around the other three members of the Creepslayerz.

“There’s only one problem though,” said Mary as she stood back and looked Steve up and down. “I don’t think we have a dress in Steve’s size. After all, Darci’s dad isn’t into co-ed sleepovers. Eli though, I can work with that.”

Steve … was hardly amused.

…

Meanwhile, Jack parked his old pickup, the engine falling silent as he turned the key off. He looked at the little house down the street. There were fliers on the mailbox and a small collection of items on the porch, likely from the local community trying to support Barbara in her time of need. Even from here he could see the flowers, foodstuffs, and stuffed animals waiting for Barbara to exit the house. The sight honestly filled him with pride for the community of Arcadia.

They lived in a good town … just odd things happened here.

Gathering his courage, Jack stepped out of the vehicle and started walking up the sidewalk at a slow pace. He had made his decision last night after speaking with the two teenagers: Steven and Claire. He still hadn’t decided if he was going to tell his great-niece everything about the monsters under this town, but he still wanted to support Barbara at this time. Part of him had always been a fighter, which was probably why he stayed in this town despite the creeping feeling that something was always waiting around the corner. Then again, maybe he was just stubborn.

Walking up to the front door, Jack stalled for a moment once again fighting back his feelings of paranoia. He had spent too many years

being afraid of monsters in the dark. It had pushed him away from relationships and what family he had left. He … was going to try.

Knocking on the door, he waited like a sentry, not even twitching as the paperboy threw a paper onto the porch next to him. He had always been stoic. He blamed it on becoming somewhat emotionally closed off after losing his brother. He wasn't heartless though. No … if he was heartless it still wouldn't hurt so much knowing he lost Jimbo.

Finally, raising his fist to knock again, the door opened. Immediately, Jack's heart sank as he watched Barbara slowly open the door, her eyes sunken and red. She looked like a flower that had had the sun stolen from her … and her red petals were wilting. He quickly tried to hide the pity in his eyes, but he didn't know if he was successful.

"Good morning, Barbara. Sorry, if I'm disturbing you. I just … had to come and see you," said Jack, trying to balance a sad smile on his face while at the same time trying to be sympathetic.

The woman blinked a few times before murmuring, "Great uncle Jack? What … what are you doing here?"

Blinking a few times as if the question had caught him off guard, he looked at the pile of offerings on the deck before he met her gaze. "Because … I figured you could use some family right now."

The woman stilled as if surprised before she looked at the pile of offerings as well, the neighbors' sprinklers turning on in the background. She was silent for a minute before she finally spoke. "You never seemed to care."

Jack's smile became a thin line, shoulders slumping as he admitted, "And that was wrong of me. I just … I just figured you didn't want to associate with me like the rest of the family. Everyone acted like … my crazy was contagious."

Stern frown falling, Barbara sighed before taking off her glasses to rub her eyes. She knew the tale of crazy Jack at the family gatherings. *Don't associate with Uncle Jack. He believes in monsters.*

Well, there were plenty of monsters in this world, but they usually wore human skin. From what her mother told her, Jack's little brother and he had been kidnapped when they were young. Jack was the only one to come back days later. He had been so traumatized … that he blamed it on monsters.

Her own shoulder's slumping, Barbara stated, "I never thought you were crazy, Uncle Jack. You were hurt at a young age and no one else could understand that."

Then, opening the door completely, she said, "Come in, the fridge is full of casseroles and I need some help eating them."

Smiling, happy that his great-niece accepted him with so much ease despite this trying time for her, he came in … hanging a horseshoe on the key holder by the door. He'd do what he could for Barbara and her boy, even if he could never once mention monsters to her.

…

"…I'm stuck," finally grumbled Steve as he tried to wedge himself in through the back window of Darci's garage, the troll costume half unpacked and nearly complete.

"If you would have just put on the dress as we told you to, you wouldn't be having this problem. You could have come through the front door," said Mary, Eli and her coming forward to try and tug the barrel chest boy the rest of the way in.

"As if! Why should I have to put on a dress," groused Steve as he pointed to a polka dotted thing on a nearby workstation, "While Eli just had to put on a wig?!"

Despite himself, Eli readjusted the golden-locked wig he was still wearing. "But it's a high-quality wig, Steve."

Steve merely rolled his eyes.

"Daddy knows girls comes in all shapes and sizes," commented Darci as she finished what looked like the fourth pair of troll feet. They were furry leg coverings so that none of the Creepslayerz shoes would be seen in case the costume got caught on something. At this point, the costume was like a long mane with eyes and arms.

"And why can't girls look this good?" asked Steve as he used his one free arm to motion at himself.

All the girls stalled to give him a look, Eli merely readjusted his wig again.

"What? There's nothing wrong with the way I look," squeaked the masculine teenager, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Claire, taping a camera onto a remote-control car (part of their scout reconnaissance plan), rolled her eyes and stood up. Steve tried not to eyeball the dark-haired girl and the damage she had sustained in order to save her brother. She had gauze and bandaging all the way down one of her arms. She even had this nasty scratch on her cheek. She ... looked badass.

“Quit whining and get in here. You are the tallest so you will be the shoulders,” said Claire as she came forward and grabbed an arm, tugged with the other two teenagers. With a yelp, the blonde tumbled into the room and onto the other Creepslayerz, dust and spare tools going everywhere.

“Nice landing, Steve,” came Eli’s muffled voice from under the wig covering his face.

“Shut up, Pepperjack,” grumbled the jock, once again questioning why he was here.

…

“This is so awkward. Are you sure that one of you girls can’t be the upper torso?” grumbled Steve as the girls boosted Eli onto the other boy’s shoulders, handing the troll head and the attached rug-cloak to the smaller boy.

“We aren’t crazy about our placement either, Steve,” grumbled Mary as she crossed her arms over her chest. “Us girls have to be the caboose. Besides, Eli will be the easiest to carry.”

Rolling his eyes before the costume fell over him, the blond wobbled for a second at the new weight, his voice muffled from behind the fake fur, “Why are we doing this again? None of us were close friends to Domzalski or Lake. In fact, the more I think about it, the more of a terrible idea this is.”

Claire, coming before the costume and adjusting the front so Steve had eye-holes, stated, “Because no one else knows what’s going on, Steve. No one else is going to be able to save them. Plus … we might find some answers as to why the goblins tried to take my brother.”

An awkward silence filled the garage for a moment as the girls all shifted uncomfortably. Mary was the first to come forward and rub her friend’s shoulder. “Don’t you worry, Claire-bomb. Those bridge trolls don’t know what’s coming. The Creepslayerz will make sure no one ever tries to grab your bother again.”

Smiling at her friend's encouragement, Claire nodded, "Thanks, Mare. Now, you want to try on those rug-Uggs and crawl into the costume. We'll see how the thing looks as a whole."

Mary sighed in surrender before stating, "Those things are fashion murder and the only reason I'm putting them on at all is because you called them Uggs."

The two other girls chuckled as Mary put on the huge furry legs, which went nearly up to her knees, before crawling under the costume's fur. Steven immediately yipped, shifting away while Eli yelped and likely struggled to keep his seat as the troll head wobbled back and forth dangerously.

"Hey! Watch the merchandise!" whine Steve, shifting under the rug. "… I have sensitive skin."

"Oh, quit your barking, Steve," grumbled Mary as she moved under the furry rug, appearing as a bump at the rear of the costume. "At least you're not the butt of the costume."

"Or the butt of everyone's jokes," Steven chuckled. Immediately there was a slapping noise, the boy whining, "My sensitive skin!"

Darci and Claire, quickly adding the final touches to their troll disguise, stared at the grinning troll with its badly painted yellow teeth and sweeping papier-mache horns.

Beside herself, Darci spoke what both of the girls were thinking, "It looks like a retarded mammoth … with too many googly eyes."

The two girls looked torn between laughing or crying when the door attached to the house opened, Mr. Scott stalling with his phone in hand. He looked at the two girls and then at the troll costume. The awkward moment lasted far longer than it should have.

"Oh, hey girls … what are you working on?" said Detective Scott slowly, part of his inner cop telling him he didn't want to know as the costume turned in his direction.

"Just a costume project, daddy," said Darci quickly, trying not to sweat. "Did you need something?"

"I just wanted to check on you girls and make sure everything was okay out here," neither of the girls missed how the man's eyes lingered on Claire, his brow furrowing in worry. "I also wanted to

know if pizza was alright?"

"Pizza will be great," said Claire with a strained smile, part of her still feeling guilty about lying to the police. Really, what else could she say except it was all a blur and that she didn't get a good look at her brother's near-kidnapper? Goblins would just make her sound crazy and then she'd be no help to anyone.

"Okay," he said, eyes sweeping back and forth in suspicion. "You kids have fun with your project. Let me know if you need anything at all."

He then closed the door to the house slowly as if he was expecting the teenagers to say something more. Only once they heard his footsteps echo away into the house, did Claire turn back to their costume. "It'll have to do. Time might be running out for Toby and Jim … Tomorrow night, we infiltrate the troll cave under the bridge."

Chapter End Notes

> I'm not the happiest with this chapter. That's probably why it took so long. Also, Detective Scott needs a first name. Does anyone know what it is or have any suggestions?

An Eager Student

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Is the lesson not to your liking, Young Jim?” asked Vendel as he stalled in the placing of stones, the alignment causing them all to glow and make the stone in the middle float. Jim continued to push around the stones in front of him on the table, his head in one of his arms. He looked absolutely miserable.

Vendel resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Pouting whelps were all the same no matter the race.

“I know stone aligning is probably a bit dull after something like blood magic,” added Vendel with a small chuckle as he tried to bring up the human’s spirits, “But it is a good solid magic and rarely falters when you need it most. Also, it's unlikely to try and eat you.”

Jim continued to sit there, obviously lost in his own thoughts. Vendel sighed and sat down at the small stone table next to Jim. The seer had been moping since last night after the blood magic incident. Blinky’s ears were probably still ringing after Vendel had finished yelling at him.

“What is wrong, Young Jim. I have heard my fair share of heartache and I am no stranger to it. I will offer what advice I can,” he said. It wasn’t that Vendel liked having these kinds of conversations, he usually ignored them when he could, but there was just something about a pouting youngling that couldn’t be ignored … especially if it was interfering with a lesson. He really didn't have time for this.

Sighing again, pushing a few of the stones around until they glowed and allowed the stone in the middle to float, Jim finally broke his silence. “I know you all think I’m a seer, that I didn’t live those months. Personally, I think it was time travel. Toby, on the other hand, said it doesn’t matter and that I shouldn’t be so upset when people call me Seer. He said that it can’t be proven either way: if I lived those moments or dreamed them. Time was changed forever when I decided to save Kanjigar. I made that choice and I don’t regret it.”

Frowning, Vendel slowly nodded as if asking the boy to continue.

“I … *understand* … why Kanjigar wants me to stay in Troll Market. It makes sense. If Bular found me and I told him of the future, it would be disastrous,” continued Jim before he turned a begging look to the aging troll. “But what I don’t understand is why I am treated so differently. I at least was semi-respected after Draal and you got over wanting me dead … Actually, now that I think about it, everyone in Troll Market but Blinky and Aaarrgghh kind of wanted me dead.”

Vendel raises a brow at that and was about to inquire what that meant, but the teenager continued, “Now, I’m either treated like a lost child or a crazy person whose mind might crack at any given moment. I … I just want to go home. Mom didn’t treat me differently, Tobias doesn’t either. They treated me like I’m … real.”

Sighing, noting that the boy’s eyes were sunken and that he was truly upset with what happened yesterday, Vendel reached a claw forward and pushed Jim’s stones in such a way that they sang. It was a soft hum, comforting for trolls. He hoped it would do the same for the to-be wizard.

“Of course, you are real, Young Jim. You are as real as I or anyone else in Troll Market,” said Vendel softly, letting it sink in before he continued. “As for how you were treated, I cannot say unless you tell me more about this … *past life*. It probably had something to do with how that Trollhunter treated you. If you were a confidant, you would automatically have some kind of status in Troll Market even as a human. Here, Kanjigar sees you as a human whelp given a heavy burden: the future. You were even introduced to the city guard as a child burdened with foresight. Thus, even though you may be a teenager in your culture, you are a mere babe compared to trolls … And young trolls are a rare commodity. Gunmar’s war took more than the old country from a lot of us.”

Jim looked up to meet Vendel’s unwavering gaze only to look away. He had never really thought about it before. There was not a lot of troll-kids in Troll Market compared to the adult population. It made his stomach sink, guilt forming there.

“I’m sorry. I never really thought … about that,” said Jim, feeling like dirt when he recalled that he had re-released Gunmar onto the world. “I’m really sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry about, Young Jim. It was not your hand that stole our children and destroyed our homes,” he said calmly, before leaning forward again and shifting one of the standing stones

so that the color of the stones changed. “So, you must forgive us old trolls for treating you like a whelp. To us, you are one. In time, they will look at you differently.”

Frown still on his lips, Jim leaned forward and shifted a different stone, the stones turning pink. Tilting his head, he had to ask, “Can’t I at least be called Mage Jim or Master Jim or something.”

Vendel laughed heartily and moved a different stone in the network, causing all of the stones to lift up slightly and float, “That might be a bit ambitious. Wizards work very hard for their title. It can take decades and no Wizard or Mage has ever earned their title without at least having a Channeling Stone. Merlin’s was a great staff, the Staff of Avalon. It was difficult to craft, and he nearly killed himself during the task. You haven’t even learned stone cutting.”

Leaning forward, Jim laughed dryly, “Ha! That’s where you are wrong! I cut the Triumbric Stones … after … all.”

Seeing Vendel’s eyes widen, Jim immediately noticed his mistake. Ugh, no! He kept slipping things out. What was wrong with him? He's supposed to be affecting the timeline as little as possible. Ugh, his mind kept slipping and forgetting that this Vendel wasn't the same Vendel he knew.

“Please say you didn’t hear that,” said Jim miserably, sinking into his stone chair in horror. Bular wasn't even dead. He was pushing too fast. He was going to mess everything up.

Blinking once or twice, the troll huffed, “I did, Young Jim. Where were they found and why were you the one to cut them?”

Sinking deeper into his chair, Jim covered his eyes and sighed, “I … It’s too soon. Months too soon. Ugh, I'm messing the timeline up. I just keep forgetting that … it’s just … I forget that you’re not my Vendel.”

Vendel frowned at this, the troll shaking his head slightly. “Your Vendel? There is only one of me as far as I know.”

Jim poked at the placing stones, smiling bitterly before he admitted, “Yeah, there only is one of you. It's… just … you were different. As I said, you really didn’t like me. I’m sure you even tried to have Draal kill me.”

The older troll scoffed at the unsettled seer, “Kill? Unlikely. Maim? Well, it depends if you deserved it.”

The teenager gave him an ill amused glance before he noticed Vendel was trying to smile. The teenager wiped a hand down his face in surrender and swallowed. He doesn't flinch away when a large paw was placed on his shoulder. He even wilted in surrender before he admitted, “I’ll tell you about the stones when Angor Rot shows up. Kanjigar will need the Triumbric stones if he wants to put up a fight against him … because Angor Rot will steal Daylight from Kanjigar if he manages to mark him.”

Vendel removed his paw, shock on his face at first before he seemed to wilt and accept it. "I understand, Young Seer. Is there anything else you wish to impart on me today?”

Sighing, feeling tired, Jim admitted, “I’m worried about my mom.”

The old troll was silent before nodding, “It is only to be suspected. Draal and BaaAch have been checking on Bar-Ba-Ra, though. You need not worry for her safety.”

Of course, Vendel didn’t mention that the two trolls saw a changeling at Barbara’s dwelling last night. Draal even offered to try and capture the fiend next time he showed up at the seer’s home.

Kanjigar *reluctantly* agreed.

Staring at the stones on the table, Jim turned to the aging troll, asking simply. “Aren’t you worried about teaching me magic? I could use it to escape.”

The light-colored troll raised a brow and then chuckled, “If you have learned enough to break that spell on that boundary bond, I will let you go. You’d probably have the title Mage by then. A full wizard will take much longer though.”

Jim rolled his eyes and tried to get his shoulders to relax. He didn’t want to be a seer, he mentally didn’t consider himself one either, but he wasn’t against the idea of magic now that he had had a little time to process it. Maybe he could teach some to Claire when he got to leave … however long that was going to take.

Pushing that thought to the back of his mind, Jim asked, “So, are you teaching me magic so I can fight my own battles? Wouldn’t it make more sense to teach me how to use magical swords and things like that? I can always learn things like plant growth and stone alignment later.”

Vendel hummed. “Well, a to-be mage has other worries than a flesh-eating troll catching him, Young Jim. I wanted to wait a little longer before speaking of this, but perhaps this will help you recognize the protection the Hearthstone’s light is granting you specifically.”

Jim felt his stomach sink. He almost didn’t want to ask, “… Please say it’s protection from UV rays.”

The wise troll clicked his nails on the stone table for a moment before sighing, “I’m afraid not. An endowed magic user like yourself is a bridge if you will. Your soul has a connection with the realm of magic, where the old gods went to rest after they were done building the world and the stars. In fact, Wizards and Witches were revered for this because they allowed magic back into this realm through that spiritual connection.”

The sinking feeling was getting worse, the amulet around Jim’s neck seeming to dim with his mood.

Looking at his paw on the stone table for a moment, as if he was searching for the right words, Vendel continued, “Unfortunately, there are hungry things in this realm. Old things that sleep and slumber in the dark places where even a troll will not go. Things that are not completely tangible that few swords can cut. They want that magic for themselves and will seek to corrupt a bridge, even if they must take that endowed being’s soul or mind to get it.”

Vendel was silent again, as if the words or recollections that came with this were disturbing for him. Nonetheless, he added, “Many magic users, Seer Jim, have been corrupted this way. In fact, sometimes I wonder if that was what happened to Gunmar and Merlin’s student. If something dark had crawled in under their skin or burrowed deep into their mind. The magically endowed … are not always a fruitful thing for a magic community.”

Jim felt sick, his hand unknowing circling around his amulet as if seeking comfort from it. His words were a dry whisper, “… Are you saying I’m going to becoming evil? That I’m going to turn my friends and family?”

Putting up a paw before the teenager started hyperventilating or something, Vendel stated, “No, no. The Hearthstone’s light wards off most of those things. It can even place certain types of darkness into hibernation. It was another reason I wanted Kanjigar to fetch you right away. Its easier to keep corruption at bay, then it is to cleanse

it."

Finally letting go of his amulet, the light in the stone swirling like it was upset as well, the teenager quickly asked, "… So, how do I protect myself?"

Nodding, one of Vendel's clawed fingers came forward and removed one of the alignment stones on the table. All the floating stones suddenly dropped and magnetized to the stone table. Jim jumped slightly from the loud impact, a ripple of energy flowing like magic through his hair and around the room. The teenager could feel it.

"I'm glad to hear you'll be an eager student," said Vendel with a growing smirk. "And all great lessons start with the basics. Alignment stones, like I was saying, are a sturdy tool for magic. They actually are wonderful for creating wards. Wards that can, for example, help protect ones dwelling from dark magics and even protect the dreamscape if placed next to one's bed."

Beside himself, Jim slumped a little, suddenly realizing he was going to be doing a lot of studying. "Oh, that's good … but please let it be known, that swords are much more fun."

Vendel, blinking in surprise, threw his head back in a hearty laugh.

…

Nomura's heels clicked on the museum's stone floor, the woman angrily throwing that day's newspaper into the trash. The front page said: *Kidnapping Interrupted: Sister Hero*. Her eyes glowed ominously as she turned to the three goblins that were hiding in the shadows of the room, "What happened?!"

"Waka … waka, waka," said one of them slowly.

"That's not what I asked?! Which fool was supposed to fetch the child?" she barked, a glint of madness in her eyes as the stress of the last few days started to descend upon her.

"Waka, chaka. Waka!" screamed the one with the mustache, making a slit-throat motion. "Waka … waka."

"A teenager killed him with a stick? Ugh, I'm surrounded by idiots," growled the woman, a hand raising to rub her forehead. She then grumbled to herself, "I just know Stricklander left me here alone to deal with the fallout. I'll kill him next time I see him."

She then straightened up her shoulders, folding her arms over her chest as she regained some of her composure. Bular might have threatened to eat her, but what else was new? “Find me some other prospects. We’ll choose another child.”

“Waka, chalk,” says the goblin, his eyes glinting in the shadows.

Nomura raised a brow, “I’m not going to stop you, but if you do try killing her, make sure no one sees you and hide the body. Make it look like another kidnapping. There’s apparently already a theme going on.”

Watching the goblins scamper off, the changeling pulled out her cellphone again and tried dialing Walter's number. She got his voicemail again and growls in frustration. Where is he? A jungle? There is no way his reception is this bad.

Chapter End Notes

I technically wrote this chapter at the same time as chapter 24. I also kind of hate chapter 24. So, you guys get two chapters in one week. :p

Dandelion Seeds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim could feel hot air escaping his lungs, he could feel the sweat running down his back even with the Eclipse armor on. Fear was beating like a drum in his ear, his blood running cold. Gunmar was going to catch him. Gunmar was going to play with him like a cat paws at a mouse, and like a cat, he would then eat him.

He'd never save Claire's brother as promised or make it back to his mom.

He would never get to apologize for leaving them behind.

Jumping over a large stone, Jim slid to a halt when he realized he had run himself into a dead end. The teenager swore and slid around as the shadow of Gunmar fell over him, the titan barely visible in the dim light of the Dark Lands.

The teenager took a strong stance, set his jaw and then called his sword forward … Only, it never appeared. And he was suddenly very aware that he wasn't the Trollhunter anymore. He didn't have Merlin's armor. He … had no power. He … was helpless.

Now armor-less, the teenager looked up with frightened eyes as Gunmar chuckled down at him, that monster's lone eye gazing down at him. "The games over, *boy*. There's no more fight left in you... As for me, time for a little *snack*."

…

Jim's mouth opened and *finally* … he was able to scream. He could feel Gunmar's phantom claws ripping down his back; he could feel the snap of his bones under large teeth; and he could even hear Gunmar's laugh in his ears.

Why had he gone in alone? Why did he ever go into the Dark Lands alone?

"Gunmar!" finally wailed Jim, his mind trapped under that titan's gaze as he kicked, thrashed and screamed.

“Jim!” came a voice through the haze. “Wake up!”

Jim’s eyes snapped open just in time to see himself smacking Toby in the face, the other boy tripping away from his bed furs while grabbing his nose. Sitting up, heart in his throat and his clothes soaked in sweat, Jim tried to gather himself as he ran a hand down his face.

“T-toby … what? But,” stumbled Jim in confusion. Running his hands through his sopping wet hair while resisting the urge to tug at it, he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to remember what was going on. He was in Troll Market. Yes. He had time traveled. He had saved Kanjigar. Gunmar … Gunmar was never going to happen.

Only allowed to sit there and dwell for a few seconds, the heavy thud of rushed troll feet met Jim’s ears. A second later Blinky threw open the door, eyes shifting in all directions as he took in the scene. Toby was still sitting on the floor, head tilted back because of the bloody nose he now sported. Jim, meanwhile, looked like death warmed over.

“What happened? Young Jim? Tobias?” asked Blinky as he immediately headed over to Toby first, taking out a hanky and giving it to the pudgy teenager before helping him to his feet and to the edge of the bed. Jim immediately murmured sorry to Toby, but the good-natured boy just waved it off with an awkward smile.

“Ibs okay, Im. Ladies lub war wounds. Busides, ebreyone has nightmurs,” said Toby as he titled his head back farther.

Blinky immediately turned to look at Jim, all his eyes focusing on the boy as the troll asked carefully, “Was it … another vision?”

Jim flinched.

Grinding his teeth for a second, Jim told himself not to snap at Blinky. Instead, he released a breath before grumbling, “No. It was just a dream.”

Not wanting to remain in bed, the teenager kicked off his bed furs and threw his feet over the side of his sleeping slab. He then reached for his amulet, which he had placed next to his alignment stones on the nightstand … only to stall. Last night he had set up his first ward with the alignment stones to protect his mind as he slept. It had been a soft pink light when he had crawled into bed. Tobes had even joked that it was a great nightlight. Now though … the stones were black. It looked like they had been torched.

Dread immediately settled in Jim's gut.

"M-my alignment stones," was all Jim could mutter as he left his amulet where it was, stepping away from the bed like it was infected. Had something dark tried to crawl into his dreams last night? Was he already been corrupted? Was his amulet corrupt now as well?

Blinky, following the teenager's gaze, stalled and stared at the soot-colored stones. "Oh, my. That's not good."

…

Vendel had barely started browsing through his tomes for Seer's Jim's lesson that evening when Blinky stumbled into the dwell … a curse box in his hands. Immediately, the older troll sighed and dwelled on the idea of hiding in one of the storage caverns around his habitat. He was in no mood for whatever madness Blinky had brought upon himself. The younger troll had a way of bringing misfortune on himself. The price of curiosity, he supposed.

"Vendel. Vendel! A moment of your time please," came Blinky's voice, a pinch of worry already in his tone.

Huffing out a long sigh, praying to the old gods for patience, Vendel groused, "If you've gone and gotten yourself cursed again, I have better things to do with my time then deal with your messes, Blinkous."

Frowning, his feet still moving, the trainer grumbled, "The curse box is not for me, Vendel. It is for Young Jim's benefit."

Stalling, marking his page before turning his full attention to the blue troll, the old troll asked, "Is that so? Where are Seer Jim and his pudgy tag along, anyway? For that matter, where is Aaarrrgghh?"

Frowning, placing the cursed box (a wooden box made of arcanely grown wood and blessed steel) on the slab before Vendel, Blinky murmured, "Currently, Aaarrrgghh is taking Young Jim and Tobias to the Hero's Forge for weapons training. I thought it best that Jim has something to distract himself with … while we try to clear up this mess."

Vendel didn't like the sound of that.

Looking at the curse box wearily, he cautiously asked, "… What is in the box, Blinkous? I swear if its more blood magic-"

Rolling his eyes, turning the box to face the older troll, the trainer opened it to reveal something wrapped in fabric … and charred stones. Alignment stones if Vendel had to guess.

“If you cannot tell, these were the alignment stones you gave to Young Jim yesterday,” said Blinky as he waved at the charred remains. “That’s how they were found this morning next to Seer Jim’s bed furs. He had been frightened awake … He did not wish to speak about the dream when I inquired.”

Leaning forward, using one of the metal tongs from his supplies, Vendel picked up one of the alignment stones before he muttered, “This is worrisome Blinkous, because it means one of two things. Either, something was trying to get in to feed on or corrupt Jim's magic … or someone was trying to block another vision.”

Putting the stone back, rubbing a paw down his face, the elder troll eyed the wrapped item next. “What is in the wrapping?”

Wincing slightly, Blinky carefully peeled the fabric away without touching what was underneath. Instantly, blue light filled the little box causing Vendel to frown even more.

“He …refused to touch it,” said Blinky calmly as he carefully picked up the amulet with the fabric, not touching the item’s metal. He then moved forward and placed the shining item on the stone slab next to Vendel’s arcane tools, a jar of eyes turning to look at the amulet before blinking in irritation at the light and looking away.

“Did he say why?” asked Vendel, grabbing a few small vials and pouring them into a mortar and pestle. “The magically endowed can sometimes sense when any of their tools have been corrupted, but Seer Jim is too young and unskilled for such a task.”

Shaking his head, Blinky merely murmured, “He did not say. I think he was merely afraid that something was wrong with it like the stones. He … is terrified of being corrupted like so many magic users before him.”

Grinding the chosen ingredients into a fine powder before adding some dandelion seeds to the top and shaking it, Vendel huffed, “I knew it was too soon for that conversation yesterday, but the alignment stones did their job. I might have to skip ahead to protection runes tonight. Now, step back … or not. You do have more than enough spare eyes.”

Nose scrunching up, Blinky stepped back without comment as Vendel poured the grounded ingredients and seeds into his paw. He then carefully blew on the pile of white dust so that it would fall over the amulet. Immediately there was a crackling noise like small fireworks were going off. Little sparks of blue formed over the amulet as the dandelion seeds caught aflame before disappearing.

"... I only see Jim's magic. Nothing hostile seems to have attached to it. Nonetheless, I will help the seer with a cleansing ritual tonight. He needs to know how to do such ceremonies regardless. As for the alignment stones," grumbled Vendel as he turned the remaining powder toward the curse box and the blackened stone within. "Let's see if anything can be revealed."

Once again, Vendel blew the ground powder out of his palm, the dandelion seeds seeming to glint oddly before bursting into angry yellow flames right above the curse box. Suddenly, there was a roar, like there was going to be an explosion or a backlash of magic, but the curse box reacted immediately seeming to intake a deep breath. The box quickly sucked up all the yellow flames, the lid slamming shut as half a dozen little locks around its front snapped shut. The box shook and bounced for a few seconds on the table before going still and burping, a little cloud of yellow smoke escaping from the thin seams in the lid.

"Well … that was certainly volatile, wasn't it," said Blinky first, back pressed against a cauldron a few feet away from the curse box; Blinky could be spry on his feet when necessary. "I think we may need more than normal protection runes lessons tonight."

Vendel, a hand on his chest, immediately sat down in shock. He then took a deep breath before he pinched his nose bridge. "Volatile doesn't even begin to describe this mess. At least the curse box saved us from a nasty backlash, Blinkous."

"A mess indeed," agreed Blinky as he waved one of his hands, trying to dissipate the yellow smoke, dust, and dandelion seeds that were floating around in the air. He didn't need dust in his eyes this evening as well.

…

"It is days like these that I regret always getting the human newspaper one day too late," grumbled Kanjigar as he read the headline: *Kidnapping Interrupted: Sister Hero.* The article was about a

near kidnapping. There was little doubt in his mind that this had to do with the Fetch that Seer Jim had been after. Yes, he knew that changelings were in town, given the one that had been in Bar-ba-ra's house. The man had yet to return according to Draal's check-ins, but that did not ease the Trollhunter's mind one bit. He would rather know where a changeling was, then not at all.

Looking over the top of the second-hand newspaper, the Trollhunter barely had time to ball it up and eat it before Seer Jim and his entourage came into the forge.

Moving forward to greet the to-be Wizard, the Trollhunter dipped his head slightly in respect as the teenager stepped before him. Kanjigar immediately noted Aaarrrgghh's nervous shifting and the slight smell of blood coming from Tobias, little clumps of tissue in the boy's nostrils. He also noted the entire *lack* of an amulet around Seer Jim's neck.

The blue troll threw a look at Aaarrrgghh, but the ex-General merely shrugged and nodded toward the exit as if saying, 'We'll speak later.'

"Good evening, Young Jim," said Kanjigar graciously as he looked away from the green troll. "Have you come to impart any wisdom on us today or have you merely come for some weapons practice? Draal picked out a few weapons he thought might be a good balance for you. BaaAch might have even found a hammer for your companion, Tobias."

Plucking at the boundary band, a nervous tick that Jim was developing, the teenager nodded, "Yeah, sure. Weapon's practice. Blinky said I should go clear my head after what happened last night."

Kanjigar's brow immediately creased, the urge to call his armor forward creeping up his spine. That sounded like an ill omen. He immediately threw his gaze towards Aaarrrgghh and the ex-General folded like a deck of cards.

Rubbing the back of his neck as if knowing that Kanjigar would become concerned, he grunted, "Something magic got into Jim's dwell. Alignment stones damaged. Blinky took them to Vendel."

The Trollhunter's eyes widen, his spine going ridged as if Aaarrrgghh had just said an army of changelings had broken into Trollmarket. "… What?"

Rubbing his neck again, Aaarrrgghh snorted, "Magic issue. Blinky

said. He will deal with it."

Frown tightly pulled at his lips, Kanjigar flexed his fingers as if in thought. "I will speak to Blinkous then. Seer Jim, do not worry. We will deal with this. For now, I will leave you in Draal's care."

Before Jim could even argue, Kanjigar was calling Draal over in Trollish, telling the younger troll to keep an eye on the seer and his companion. Then, nodding towards Aaarrgghh so the larger troll would join him, the Trollhunter was gone.

Draal, as if knowing Jim was going to follow after the departing Trollhunter, suddenly stepped in his way. Dipping his head like his father had done in a show of respect before he crushed the human in training tonight, the spikey troll crossed his arms over his chest and grinned excitedly, "Good evening, Seer Jim. Father asked me to teach you the basics of swordplay. Do not feel ashamed if you lose spectacularly."

The sense of dread Jim had been feeling all morning immediately fell to the back of his mind when he saw Draal smirk like that. It was a taunt, a challenge, and it immediately brought Jim's competitive nature forward.

Giving the blue troll a look of disbelief, the teenager smirked as well and crossed his arms over his chest. "The only one that is going to have an epic fail here is you, Draal. Like I've been telling everyone, I know my way around a sword."

Scoffing, waving the two teenagers over to a weapon rack of smaller swords and lighter axes that he had prepicked for these lessons, Draal added, "We shall see, student Jim. Let it be known that I will take great enjoyment in crushing you and painfully correcting your assumptions, but first … choose a weapon."

Jim, stepping forward with a gleam in his eyes, his finger's twitching for an old friend, chose a simple blade. He took a stance and slashed the blade forward to get a feel for the weight. It didn't feel like Daylight. Daylight was light and swift, easy to hold. He would forever miss its perfect balance … but the thrill of putting Draal in his place was too good of a chance to miss out on.

Putting the blade back, he chose another.

Tobias, meanwhile, floundered backward under the weight of the hammer he had chosen. Draal and BaaAch both winced as he crashed

to the floor a second later.

"I'm okay!" cried Toby from the floor.

“Well, at least one of them knows how to hold a weapon,” added BaaAch in Trollish as they both glanced at Jim’s third choice, the teenager sliding through multiple stances like a Master that had merely been rusty; his movements become quicker with each practiced swing. “Careful Draal, he might just prove you wrong.”

Scoffing, Draal muttered in Trollish, “I am not afraid of a challenge.”

…

Kanjigar resisted the urge to cover his face with his paws and groan at the futility of everything. Seers were more trouble than they were worth. They really were, but at the same time, you couldn’t just throw one out into the wilds of the world and allow it to be. They didn’t need a heavily corrupted necromancer to cast humanity back into the dark ages … again.

Instead, he sighed and looked at the curse box which now had a few paper blessings attached to it, “And you are sure something tried to get to Young Jim through the dreamscape?”

“Yes,” said Vendel, currently going through a box of glowing stones, likely looking for a new alignment set for the seer. “Extra wards will have to be placed on the seer’s dwelling before he is allowed to sleep again. You may have to do a Sentinels-Array with the amulet as well. Whatever it was that destroyed the stones, was powerful Kanjigar.”

Signing, having not cast a Sentinels-Array spell since he got Daylight, the Trollhunter grumbled, “Magic is not one of my greater skills, Vendel.”

Nodding his head, the older troll agreed, “It is not, but many Trollhunters before you have used the amulet for wards. Not all evils can be slain with the sword or crushed with the fist, Kanjigar. Deya herself knew that.”

Frowning at the mention of the great Trollhunter, Kanjigar somberly added, “It is also what got her slain. Her spirit isn’t even in the Void because of that spell, Vendel.”

Looking up from his work, Blinky stalling in his book browsing as well, Vendel’s lip twitched, “She made her choice, Kanjigar. She

sacrificed herself to create the entrance to the realm of the Dark Lands. She was not a selfish soul."

Immediately gaping, the blue troll stumbled over his words, "I-I didn't mean it like that. I meant no disrespect. It's just … Her guidance would be invaluable right now. She might have even been able to give me some answers about the current situation."

Kanjigar then swallowed, shoulder's sagging in defeat as the feeling of failure graced his tongue, "Instead, the realms are silent… I cannot even cross over into the Void."

Vendel frowned at this, but it was Blinky's turn to speak, the small troll coming forward, "Master Kanjigar, do not worry needlessly. It is not the first time the spirits of the past Trollhunters were silent. They only speak when they feel you need guidance. Trollhunter Uurp couldn't contact them for almost a decade."

Hands becoming fists, Kanjigar growled, his frustration almost tangible, "And how can I not use their guidance *right now*? Killahead Bridge is in Arcadia. So are changelings and a seer of all things. And now an unknown entity has attacked said seer in my city under my watch! How can they not answer me now?!"

Aaarrrgghh, standing next to the Trollhunter, hummed deeply in his chest. The sound was meant to be comforting before the green nocked against the Trollhunter's shoulder lightly, smiling weakly. "Blinky right."

Sighing at his two trainers, snorting in irritation, the blue troll relented, "Fine. Let them rot in the Void. I will solve these issues myself."

"Correction," quickly interjected Blinky to stall Kanjigar before he could storm off and get himself stabbed or something. "*We*, as in your *companions*, will help you solve these issues. Yes?"

Snorting again, still unused to getting assistance with his troll hunting, the Trollhunter grumbled, "You … are correct Blinky. We will solve these issues as a clan would. Now, it looks like Vendel and you are dealing with the warding issue. Draal has Jim. Now, Aaarrgghh, are you up for a midnight hunt? We have a Fetch and a changeling to track down."

…

“Okay,” said Claire as she strapped her squirt gun full of anti-supernatural goo to her side (Eli had mixed the concoction up and it did not smell appetizing at all). “Everyone ready for Operation: Decoy-Troll? Are the remote-control cars charged and does everyone have their weapons of choice?”

The other teens all looked at each other, each and every single one dressed in what they considered infiltration gear. It was a hodgepodge of hilarity and they really should have corresponded more. At least everyone somewhat matched because of the fur-leggings.

Steve, a baseball bat with shark teeth drawn on it over his shoulder, raised his hand halfway and shrugged, “Please let it be known, I wanted to call this Operation Shark-Bat.”

Mary, fixing the eyeliner on her cheek-lines, raised her hand, “I vote anything but that.”

“I thought Operation: Trollololol was funny,” interject Darci.

The teenagers were about to start up the same argument they had had for the past hour, but Claire moved her hands in a fanning motion as if calming a crowd. “The operation name really doesn’t matter. Okay. We only have a few hours before Darci’s dad comes back. The old dummy-under-the-blanket might work, but it might not. We at least need to get in, access the situation, and head back tomorrow night if needed. Now, does everyone have their ugh … onion-garlic yogurt-stuff mix?”

Everyone patted the water-guns at their sides while Eli murmured, “We really need a better name for that.”

“Alright, everybody. We’ll cut through the forest. Grab your designated troll part and let’s move out,” she said, slamming her hand onto the garage door opener on the wall. Slowly, ever so slowly, the garage door started to creep open.

Darci, smiling sheepishly, could only grumble, “Yeah, dad’s been meaning to fix that ever since I caught it on the car’s roof.”

Claire tried not to sigh. It was official: they were all *doomed*.

Chapter End Notes

> Yeah … I love the Creepslayerz. I felt they didn’t have enough attention in the series … which is probably why they are getting

so much right now. Plus, they are totally the comedy relief right now. ^.^;

Delicate Meat Bags

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aaarrrgghh stalled and stared at the missing persons' poster, his eyes gaining a pained squint. Kanjigar, having rushed ahead, peeked around the side of the building only to stall when he noticed that the green troll wasn't following him. Watching Aaarrrgghh reach up and pull the poster down, he moved back over to his companion.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at the sheet of paper in the larger troll's grasp. Immediately, he recognized the two smiling boys in the photo. It was Young Jim and Tobias. They looked happy, careless of the worries of the world and unknowing of the burdens beneath the ground. Looking at the wall that the poster had been plastered on, he quickly noticed that there was a line of such posters.

"Mother … cares," said Aaarrrgghh, his shoulder's sagging.

Frown forming, knowing that this probably had something to do with Johanna Mmmmm, Aaarrrgghh's own mother, Kanjigar slowly took the poster, rolling it up. "We must keep going, Aaarrrgghh. We have much to do tonight. We shall check on Bar-Ba-Ra tonight and see if her changeling suitor has returned. Then we must look for the Fetch. I doubt it's at the museum, so our best bet is to see if the near-kidnapping left any clues of where the goblins are nesting."

Staring at one of the other posters, the green troll snorted before carefully asking, "When will we return Jim?"

Seeing the pain there, the mystery of what had happened to his own mother probably making this twice as painful then it had to be, Kanjigar smiled sadly at his companion before patting him on the shoulder, "When we can. I think Bar-Ba-Ra would rather have her son safe than in danger with her. Any mother would."

Still upset with the many posters were plastered on that stone wall, the ex-General grunted in acceptance. And with that, they rushed away into the night … a pair of red eyes glaring down at them from the store's roof.

…

Bular silently watched the Trollhunter and the traitor rush off. He remained on the rooftop, just staring like a haggard crow. He had been tracking the other troll's for the last half an hour. He had wanted to rush Kanjigar and run a sword through the coward's chest for taking the bridge piece, but he needed a way to get the bridge piece back. It would do him no good to kill the Trollhunter now and have the bridge piece's location die with the blue fool.

Stricklander said he had a plan on how to get the piece back and had departed swiftly after. The Gumm Gumm was sure the impure just wanted to ignore his blade and had no idea on how to get the bridge piece back. Thus, the responsibility fell on Bular's shoulders. The impures were worthless, as usual.

Watching the Trollhunter turn a corner, Bular growled and jumped off the building, the cement cracking slightly underfoot as he landed. It appeared like he was losing the advantage of highest ground since the blue fool was heading towards the suburbs, but that just made the hunt that much more challenging.

Stalking forward, struggling to keep his claws from digging into the wall next to him and announcing himself with a lesson of swift brutality, Bular stalled and stared at the wall. Two boys … were missing. The poster showed two fleshlings smiling while sitting on their bikes. Bikes like the one he had chased a few nights ago.

"The interloper," growled Bular, ripping one of the posters off the wall so he could glare at the taller of the two fleshlings. "Missing: James Lake Jr and Tobias Domzalski."

Looking down the alley, where Kanjigar and Aaarrrgghh had just been standing, the dark troll hummed in his throat. "Why haven't you returned these whelps, Kanjigar?"

His interest was once again peeked about the strange interloper from the bridge rescue. Part of him now wondered if the boy had *everything* to do with Bular's current circumstances, not just saving Kanjigar and stumbling upon the museum. Had the boy known about the bridge? Had he known about *everything*?

A prickling sense of dread ran up his spine. The timing was just too perfect under the bridge when Kanjigar was rescued. In fact, this all stank of magic.

Growling in his throat, Bular rolled up his own copy of the poster and stalked after the Trollhunter and the traitor. It seemed he had one

other thing he had to pry from the Trollhunter's throat besides where the bridge piece was located. Who was the interloper and what did he have to do with all of this?

…

Bar-Ba-Ra was not in her dwelling. Kanjigar didn't know if that was a good or bad thing, but there was a smell about the place. Something familiar … like it was someone he had forgotten.

Deciding to dwell on the scent later, the two trolls decided to make their way through the forest and to the residence where the kidnapping had nearly occurred. The two of them had to blend in with some boulders when a strange collection of human whelps (Jim and Tobias' age) went tromping through the woods.

They all had their telephone squares out, shining light onto the forest floor as the went along carrying what looked like a brown, wooly rug and … well, a round *thing*. It almost looked like a troll head which was preposterous. A costume perhaps? They all were wearing wooly boots but Kanjigar was sure All Hallows Eve wasn't for some time still.

"Odd," hummed Aaarrrgghh next to him, the children out of earshot as they marched past the two trolls in the dark.

"Indeed," whispered Kanjigar, part of him wanting to stay and watch the whelps. With the likes of Bular wandering around in the darkness, he hated leaving the youths alone, but since there was a group of them Bular was unlikely to try anything. After all, ever since Kanjigar took part of Bular's horn … the dark troll had been far wearier about eating children.

Even to this day, Bular's mocking echoed in his head, *'A child's fear is far sweeter than an adult's … Did you know that Kanjigar? No, I doubt you would. You were only able to save the one. Some Trollhunter you're turning out to be.'*

Running a hand down his face, recalling that dark year when he had almost lost the amulet not to mention his head, he was about to start creeping off when one of the children screamed.

Perking up, almost calling his armor forward to light up the darkness, one of the whelps immediately laughed, "Darci, did you just scream about a bug."

"It was the size of my face," barked a darker skinned female,

threatening to kick the largest male member of the group as he hopped away.

“Hey guys, before we wander off into certain doom. We should take a selfie to commemorate the moment. Like in every horror movie ever. Everyone say: Creepslayerz!” said a dark haired female with one of the telephone squares, the girl facing the light as all the other youths turned to look at her. Immediately, all the other whelps were blinded by a flash of light. The one with spectacles even cried, ‘Ah, I can’t see,’ and promptly tripped over a nearby branch.

Shaking his head at the oddities of human whelps, Kanjigar waved at Aaarrrgghh and they snuck around the children. They didn’t get far though before both trolls immediately stalled. They could already smell it … goblins.

Breathing deeply, Aaarrrgghh actually stood up straight and took in some deep inhales before he fell back down onto his knuckles and hummed, “Not smell good. This way.”

Nodding, Kanjigar followed. It didn’t take long for Aaarrrgghh to push a bush aside and reveal the culprit … the gooey remains of a goblin, a green splattered branch nearby. It wasn’t far from the kidnapping mentioned in the human newspaper.

Snorting the smell of dead goblin out of nostrils, Kanjigar grumbled, “That’s concerning. This, unfortunately, proves that the changelings are meaning to increase their numbers with the Fetch ... and someone now has a mark on their head. goblins are vengeful creatures.”

Aaarrrgghh hummed in agreement.

…

Jim was not a novice, that much was certain. Did he have a great amount of stamina? No. His muscle memory was also sloppy and his balance could use some work. It was like his mind was used to carrying around more weight while his body was not. Nonetheless, it was obvious that Seer Jim had held a sword before. Draal actually found himself having to dodge and defend. Their little lesson was quickly turning into a sparring match.

Quickly guarding, the clang of metal meeting metal echoing throughout the Hero's Forge, Draal laughed, “Ha! Well done! Well done, indeed. A novice you are not … but your stamina is lacking and your footwork is messy.”

With that, Draal tried to hook one of those lanky legs and trip his student. And he did succeed partially. Jim leaned into the fall, rolling into a crouch, his sword in a defensive position.

Draal frowned at this. That kind of quick footedness was not a practiced skill. It was learned. Quick feet keep you alive. Draal knew that seers lived their visions. That was what father had said. That did make him wonder now, hopping away from a well-aimed slash as his leg, what the Seer believed himself to be that he had a swordsman's skill?

Placing a hand up to stall Jim, and to also allow the noodle-armed boy a breather, Draal asked, "Are you up for a wager, Seer Jim?"

Leaning on the sword, breathing deeply, Jim swallowed once before he stood up straight and asked, "What kind of wager?"

Draal shrugged, "Well, I can see you are somewhat skilled with the blade. The wager is … you will tell me what you were in your past life."

Jim stiffened in the shoulders. He was about to outright deny the wager but then stalled. The way Draal was smirking, the troll was certain he would win, but Jim knew the forge. He could probably win if he turned the great hulking machine on. it had worked before.

Frowning, raising a brow, Jim asked, "And I can ask for anything in turn for this wager?"

Shifting awkwardly, a frowning tugging away his grin, Draal shrugged, "… Within reason. I will not help you leave Troll Market if that's what you are going to ask for."

Deflating slightly, ready to deny the request, Jim quickly stalled his tongue. The only reason he didn't want to be down in Troll Market, truthfully, was because of his mom. He hated worrying her. Plus, he would like to reintroduce himself to Claire with Romeo and Juliet practice. It wasn't like he missed school. Claire though … he did miss her.

Swing his sword in a showy manner as he took a fighter's stance in challenge, Jim smiled, confident that he could win, "Okay, you will deliver a note, personally, to my mom and let her know I am alright."

Draal's jaw dropped, "… You want me to *reveal* myself to a human?"

Nodding, promising himself he wasn't leaving her in the dark this time around if he had to be part of this world, Jim added, "Yes … unless the wager is too high for you?"

Jim shifted and took a defensive stance as if mockingly, his muscle sore from the exertion even though mentally he never wanted to put a blade down again. He felt safe knowing he could defend himself.

Looking at the entrance of the forge, as if making sure his father nor Vendel were there, Draal nodded and took his own stance, "I accept your wager. Usually, trolls will spar until one is rendered unconscious or blood is drawn. In this case, a simple admittance of superiority or loss of weapon is all that will be required."

Stretching his neck, Jim added, "The first to call Uncle, huh? Alright."

And with that, Draal charged, swiping at Jim as if he was going to fell a tree and not a human teenager. In turn, knowing he would lose his blade if he tried to guard that attack, Jim hopped to the side and made a slash at Draal's wrist. Draal winced at the contact but given he was stone it would take a lot more than that to break his hide.

The troll swiped again, less heavy-handed as if he remembered he needed a little more grace when it came to fleshies. Jim dodge-rolled the swipe, still unwilling to meet Draal's brute strength head-on. Draal was just physically stronger than him and probably had a ton of stony flesh to throw around. Daylight could cut through stony flesh … but once again Jim was reminded, he wasn't the Trollhunter anymore. He really hoped he won this little spar. He didn't want to admit that he had been the Trollhunter at all.

Rolling away from another attack, Jim slashed at one of Draal's legs. Unfortunately, he barely had time to bleat in surprise as Draal sidestepped the swipe and made a quick grab for the teenager's back, picking Jim up by his scruff as if he was a feisty kitten.

Kicking out as he tried to wiggle out of his own shirt, not at all ready to lose, Jim tried to call on his magic.

The spiky troll only had time to widen his eyes in surprise before a blinding blue light escaped the teenager's hand. Draal immediately dropped his opponent and grabbed for his eyes, stumbling back.

Panting, the burst of magic seeming to zap his stamina without his amulet, Jim started running for the walls. BaaAch and Tobi probably thought he was making a run for it as they both watched, but Jim

proved them wrong as he hit one of the stone controls to the Heroe's Forge. Immediately, the floor started shifting, Draal yelping in surprise as his footing started to slide away. Jim merely gave a smug smile before immediately gasping and jumping out of the way of a giant blade.

Toby, dropping his hammer as BaaAch pushed them both flush against the wall and out of immediate danger, cried out, “Jim what are you doing?! Are you crazy town banana-pants?!”

Running back toward Draal, skipping over forming cracks in the floor, Jim cried back, “Yes, and I’m going to win!”

Draal, still trying to blink the dots out of his eyes, barely was able to crack one eye open in time to see Jim jumping down from one of the raising planes … to kick him right in the face.

Taking a foot to the face like a champ, Draal stumbled backward … and fell right off the edge, landing with a huff on the moving platform below. Snorting, blinking his eyes as he laid on his back for a moment, the blue troll stared up at the smirking teenager. Instead of being upset though, the young troll laughed, raising his sword up to show it was still in hand.

“You are a strategist in the making, Seer Jim. When your enemy has superior strength or skill, use the environment to assist you in victory,” he bellowed good naturally before smirking, “But let it be known that missing a kill allows your enemy to rise again.”

Jim’s smirk barely had time to fall off his face before he was whispering, “No, no, no!” a blue death ball suddenly bounding up onto his level and after him like a deranged hedgehog.

Taking a leap of faith, Jim barely made it to the next platform before it started tilting in the opposite direction, causing him to slide downward and towards a bender’s worth of blades. Screaming the whole way down, Jim barely catapulted off the shifting surface in time to grasp another platform.

Draal, now hanging off a vertical platform like a blue gorilla, raised a brow as Jim and he drifted farther and farther apart. Cupping his mouth, Draal shouted across the growing distance, “Let it also be known Jim, that the environment can hurt you just as much as your opponent. If I must catch you from falling to certain death, I am counting that as an admittance of surrender. To spare you the embarrassment of being carried down, you can just surrender now.”

Getting to his feet, sweat already running down his back, Jim pointed his sword at Draal in challenge as he groused, “Same goes for you, Draal. I’m not done yet.”

Tilting his head as if mocking a child, Draal grinned, “Very well.”

And with that, the troll was leaping the distance, landing in a roll that quickly became a death ball.

Gasping, running to the edge of the stone platform, Jim cursed as the next platform rose up and out of his reach. Then, to make matters worse, the one he was on had started to tilt upward and toward said death ball. Acting like a trapped rat, still unwilling to meet the full force of one of Draal’s swings and be promptly disarmed, Jim leaped for the ledge.

Draal, in shock, rolled to his feet and rushed up the inclining platform to peek over. He was met with a grinning visage of Jim as the teenager barely clung to the underside of the ramp by one of the pistons that turned the platform.

Frowning down at the whelp, Draal barely had time to pull himself over the ledge and towards the rotating gears when he saw Jim leap down to the main floor. The whelp was smart enough to roll with his fall so he wouldn’t break his ankle, but even from here Draal could see a slight limp.

Smirking, feeling like he was dealing in injured prey now, Draal jumped down as well to the main floor. His landing echoed and he couldn’t help but watch Jim turn slightly and cringe.

Snorting, loving this little duel even with all its oddities, the blue troll laughed heartily and started running after the teenager. Jim swore and ran forward, seeming to corner himself as he stalled near one of the walls, sword lifted in a defensive stance. It was a good defense kata … for a human, but Jim just didn’t have the brute strength needed to block a troll’s swing.

Stalling before the teenager, lifting his own blade, Draal added, “There is no dishonor in a good death, Seer Jim. Luckily for you, disarming you is sufficient enough.”

Jim still held his stance as Draal’s blade swung down. He seemed determined to stand his ground … until the last second when he leaped out of the way of Draal’s swing revealing that one of the forge’s giant wall blades was swinging outward.

“Sweet Deya’s Ligggtttthhhhh!!” cried Draal as he barely guarded against the giant swinging blade, the force throwing him across the forge like a rag doll and right into one of the weapons racks with a resounding crash.

Jim stood there in surprise for a moment, catching his breath. When Draal didn’t immediately rise, the teenager laughed tiredly, “Did I win? … I think I won! There is no way Draal is getting up from that!”

Draal’s hand, as if rising to the challenge, suddenly burst out of the rubble … sword still firmly in his grasp. He hadn’t been disarmed.

Shaking the rubble off, standing there like a perturb dog, Draal pointed his sword and barked out, “That will not work a second time, seer! Prepare yourself for the calling of uncle!”

Smile fading, Jim stood there for a moment completely befuddle before he whispered, “I’m so dead.”

With that, he started to run, dodging swinging blades and death traps as he tried to think of a good strategy, Draal growing closer and closer like a charging bull. That all came to an immediate painful standstill thought when the Heroes Forge suddenly stalled with a squeal, both forms tripping from the loss of inertia.

A demanding voice immediately echoed over the expanse, “Enough! What tomfoolery is going on here?!”

Draal rose before Jim, mere feet from catching the teenager, to watch Vendel crossing the forge. The old troll glared at both of them as if he was dealing with whelps and not warriors. Draal immediately rubbed the back of his neck guiltily while Jim limped to his feet, obviously favoring one ankle over the other.

“Well? Do not stand there like two de-tongued goats,” said the aged being, eyeballing the two.

Jim was still trying to get his mind around de-tongued goats when Draal answered, “His skills seemed acceptable for a spar, Vendel. So we-“

“Does a spar involve killing the Seer? He was nearly crushed by the forge. Humans are delicate meat bags, Draal,” said Vendel, waving a hand at Jim as if the human didn’t understand what he was saying. Vendel wasn’t even speaking in Trollish.

"… Meat bag?" grumbled Jim sourly. "I'll have you know that I turned on the forge. I nearly won as well."

Draal huffed, "Hardly. You were a rock's fall from calling out for your uncle. In fact, you probably only lasted as long as you did because you were cheating with your seer abilities."

Jim looked offended and Draal obviously felt cheated of an easy victory, but neither was allowed to air their grievances when Vendel suddenly bonked both on the head with his staff. Jim yelped and grabbed for his head while Draal merely looked offended, but Vendel really didn't care as he grumbled, "There will be no uncle calling. We have enough humans down here. Now, clean up your mess Draal, before your father returns. As for you, Young Jim, the forge is not a toy and we are going to the river."

"Why?" grumbled Jim as he rubbed his head, promptly being dragged along like an invalid. "To drown me and put me out of my misery?"

Snorting, his lips almost becoming a smile, Vendel drawled, "If only we were both so lucky."

…

There, in the shadows of Holland Transit Bridge, stood a sagging, misshapen and slightly terrifying figure. Most of that fear came from its sheer size alone and dead-eyed gaze. Any semi-normal person wouldn't want to be trapped alone with it in an alley … Even if it did look like a retarded mammoth.

"We ready for this?" said a muffled voice from the mammoth's butt-area.

"Yes, it is hot back here," came a whiney voice.

A masculine voice towards the mammoth's front could only chuckle, "Well … you are the back end."

Said cheeky comment was followed with a kicking sound and a yip.

"Come on, guys. Don't fight," came another male voice, squeaky and high pitched. "Let's just … draw the door."

There was some shuffling under the mammoth's fur and then a very un-mammoth hand popped out. Slowly, the arm started to draw half a circle, the Horngazel glowing dimly in shadows of the bridge.

At first, when the doorway was done, it seemed like nothing was going to happen, but then that slim hand pressed again the cement … and a doorway seemed to burst into existence. Several gasping noises escaped the mammoth at once, even though such a beast should only have one set of lungs. Nonetheless, as if in awe, the mammoth stood there wearily before shuffling forward into the unknown.

Gaupp, the trash troll, watch all of this curiously, terribly confused. Where had a newcomer gotten a Horngazel?

In the end, he just shrugged and grabbed his wagon. He'd tell the Trollhunter when he returned. It was trash day after all and he had things to do instead of wondering where the new troll hailed from. They smelled like sour garlic, onions, dusty carpet, and just a hint of sweaty gym socks. So they obviously had good taste. Yes, they might seem a bit odd, but odder types had visited Troll Market before. After all, Blinkous lived down there.

Chapter End Notes

Jim is a seer cheater who cheats. :p

Land Seals

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This place is … AMAZING!” shouted Eli, his voice echoing and causing the entire mammoth costume to cringe as it stumbled down the final glowing step into Troll Market.

“Shhh, quiet Eli,” came a rushed whisper from one of the girls. “We don’t know that our disguise is successful until we interact with an actual troll. They might see right through our costume.”

“Ooh, right. Sorry,” said Eli, his voice softening. “So, how about we send Infiltrator-1 first and see what’s out there. Maybe we don’t have to interact with them at all and we can just sneak through alleys or something.”

“Good plan,” added Darci, taking her backpack off under the rug and turning on her headlamp. She then unzipped said bag to reveal a remote-control car with a small camera taped on top. Mary, in turn, pulled out a tablet, having been dubbed the Communications Officer of their little rescue effort. Darci then placed the plastic vehicle outside of the mammoth-disguise and stood next to the other girl, readying the controls.

Biting her upper lip, a look of concentration on her face, Draci pushed the analog stick forward and the little monster truck zoomed to life, making a huge U and promptly hitting into Steve’s leg.

Steve yipped and turned away from his eyeholes, glaring at the girls. “Can you even drive that thing?”

“Yes,” grumbled Darci. “I can drive just fine.”

With that, she reversed the little vehicle and it was off. It sped along like it owned the place, running wild and free. It was going places, doing things. It was -*smaaaash*!!

The three girls immediately gasped as the screen went dark. Steve and Pepperjack also gasped, immediately backing up into the girls, their gazes forward.

“What just happened?” hissed Mary as she shook the tablet.

“It wasn’t me,” groused Darci. “My driving was fine.”

“What was the blur before it went dead? Did either of you get a good look at it?” asked Claire, leaning in.

“Uh, girls?” choked Steve. “I think we have bigger issues than Darci's driving.”

As usual, Steve was promptly ignored. Instead, the three girls continued smacking the tablet until Eli finally stuck his head down into the body of the disguise, his voice squeaking, “Uh, I don’t mean to interrupt … but I think you should peek out front. We … have made first contact.”

The mass of fake troll’s legs immediately shuffled ahead, none of the limbs seeming to march in time. It looked especially odd when all the legs crowded to the front of the costume to peek out of Steve’s eye holes.

It ... was a troll.

The first troll they saw was a normal orange troll, loinclothed, and picking his nose. Some would say he was nothing special, humdrum, and certainly not worth this amount of excitement he was stirring up. The kids all gapped nonetheless, not that the troll knew that. He just lifted his foot, watch one of the rubber toy wheels bound away and then continued onward, unaffected. Not once did he look in the kids' direction.

Only once the orange troll had passed by did all the teenagers explode into a cascade of excited, terrified, and slightly disgusted whispers.

“Did you see the size of him! We’re all going to die down here. Why did I come with you losers?”

“How has no one ever seen these things in town before? I mean, come on?”

“Eww, disgusting. Did anyone else see that he was picking his nose.”

“I think he’s made of Ryolite. Don’t you think, guys? Or maybe some type of granite. I’d have to get closer though. This is so amazing.”

The chatter continued for a few more seconds until another troll, green and burly, walked by. He didn’t even glance their way.

“Okay, we passed the test. Let’s leave and come back later ... or never,” squeaked Steve, hating himself for getting involved in this whole debacle. If he could have just avoided Eli after school the other day he would still be pleasantly ignorant of the nightmares that burrowed around under Arcadia. Yeah, plenty of people said Arcadia was a little abnormal, but this was way above *abnormal*.

Claire, of course, killed Steve’s dreams of fleeing.

“This still doesn’t prove anything. Neither one paid us any mind. It just proves that trolls are nearsighted or completely oblivious to the world around them,” said Claire. “Steve, go find a troll to talk to?”

“What?! Why me?!” he squeaked.

“Because you are in the front, nimrod,” added Mary. “Now hurry up. My Rug-Uggs are getting sweaty.”

Bemoaning his coming death, Steve shuffled farther into Troll Market, stalling in the middle of the street when an orange troll finally seemed to notice them. The troll just stared as if curious so, Mary having to poke him in the back to keep him moving, Steve tripped forward. He had no idea what to say. So, he decided to fall into a default conversation.

“Hey … what’s up? You come here often?” said Steve as he tried to lean against a nearby wall and look cool, even though he was a few heads shorter than the troll in question. He could practically hear all the girls rolling their eyes in the troll costume.

The orange troll continued to look at them oddly before he grumbled, “Whatever,” and wandered away. The teenagers were all silent until the troll was out of hearing range, someone poking Steve in the back. “Ouch! Why does everyone keep kicking and poking me?! You told me to interact with a troll and I did.”

“I said to interact,” grumbled Claire. “Not flirt with him.”

“I didn’t flirt with him. And how do you know it was a he and not a she? Its kind of hard to tell,” defended Steve. “Regardless, I was just … breaking the ice. What’s so wrong with that?”

Claire rolled her eyes, stepping up next to Steve so she could see out of the eye-holes. She could see a busy intersection about half a block away near what looked like a cat shelter? She had no idea, but there was a neon cat sign on the building. In fact, there was a lot of neon

lighting in the place. She didn't know if it was magic or electricity, but with that giant glowing stone in the distance, she was guessing the later.

"This place is magic, isn't it?"

"Generally, I would try to gather supporting evidence before proclaiming this, but yes! This place is definitely magic," agree Eli as he peeked down at the teens below. "I still can't believe this place is right below our feet. It's amazing."

Staring at the city a little while longer, Claire's wonderment started to go sour. Her lips thinned into a frown before she spoke, "For such a pretty place, it sure has a lot of terrible secrets though, doesn't it? The Milk Carton Epidemic, Jim & Toby's kidnapping, and why anyone would try to steal my brother."

Everyone was silent for a moment before Darci added, "Then let's find some answers."

And so, they shuffled like an odd caterpillar into the city's expanse, unaware that they had already gained the attention of more than one figure in the great city.

…

Half an hour later, it became apparent that they seemed to be blending in just fine. And so, the Creepslayerz trudged forward through the odd streets looking for clues. Steve had almost been banned from asking questions after asking one troll if they had seen any useless buttsnacks around.

"I vote we ban Steve from talking for the rest of this trip. His communication skills suck," added Darci.

"Hey, that last troll kept sniffing us. He was being rude," grumbled Steve as they hurried past a merchant selling what looked like living slimeballs.

"We might think it's rude, but it might be completely normal for them," commented Claire, nearly plowing right into Steve as the taller teen sudden stopped dead in his tracks. "… Why did you stop, Steve? Do you see anything?."

“I think we’ve been spotted,” suddenly whispered Steve.

Before any of the girls could even question it though, Eli poked his head own into the mammoth body, agreeing, “Uh, yeah, guys, I think Steve’s right. The *whatever* and *buttsnack* trolls are both pointing at us … while talking to some armed trolls. I think it’s the troll's peacekeepers or authority figures … and ugh … they’re definitely coming this way.”

Mary immediately grabbed Steve by his shirt and shook him, “I’m too pretty to die! I haven’t even kissed Tight Jeans Hank! Tight Jeans!”

“Guys stop shaking Steve! I’m going to fall!” wailed Eli as he was nearly knocked from his perch.

“Mare, calm down. We can’t panic now!” cried Darci as she tried to stop the other girl from strangling the school bully.

“Stop screaming everyone or you’re going to blow our cover,” hissed Claire as she tried to calm everyone down.

To the passerby, it looked like the mammoth-looking troll was having an episode or something. All his legs were flopping about as his main body shook, his head haphazardly swinging back and forth as he … shouted at himself?

The town guard, while originally just watching the newcomer, was now actively investigating as multiple denizens came over to them to report the oddity.

“They’re coming closer! What do we do?!” squeaked Eli as he clung to Steve’s head.

Claire quickly pulled Mary off of Steve, stating calmly, “Remain calm. That’s what. Steve, Eli. Stay in the costume. We can’t all be caught if that is in fact why those trolls are heading over here. Just … flirt with them or something, and we’ll cause a distraction so you can shuffle away. Okay?”

“Flirt? Distraction? Like what? An explosion? Don’t leave us here!” nearly wailed Steve as Claire lifted up the backside of the troll, running into a nearby dark alley while the other two girls followed after.

Swallowing, Steve whimpered, “We’re so going to die.”

Eli didn't get to reciprocate that statement when suddenly two large trolls stalled in front of them. One had an axe and the other carried a halberd. The one with the halberd might have been a girl-troll … maybe, if her voice was anything to go off. Not that either boy understood a word that she said. She was likely speaking in another language. Greaaaat. Just awesome.

Trying to keep his knees from knocking together, especially when the troll holding the axe tightened his grip on the handle, Steve stumbled, "W-what did you say?"

Crossing her arms over her chest, halberd thankfully still strapped to her back, the female troll spoke again. Her voice was gravelly, intimidating, and kind of lovely … in a biker chick way. Not that Steve knew any biker chicks, but if he did, they'd probably sound like that.

"Why aren't you replying in Trollish, newcomer," finally said the female troll, ill amused. "Have you taken too many hits to the head?"

Swallowing, Eli covering his eyes, Steve was left to deal with this conversation all on his own. "Ugh, nnnooo. I was just awestruck by … y-your rugged … beauty? P-plus, my Trollish is a bit … rusty."

Steve watched the Creepslayerz girls roll their eyes as they took cover in a nearby alley … though their opinions hardly matter as they all dived into nearby barrels a second later, a troll heading down their alley. Some help they were.

Turning his attention back to the tolls at hand, Steve noticed that the axe-bearing troll was now shaking his head and putting his axe away. Apparently, he was used to such flirtations happening as he spoke to the female town's guard. "Shout if he tries killing you, Lump. I don't wanna listen to more trolls flirt with you today."

The bulky troll then stomped a few yards away, leaning against the wall. Lump merely looked amused, puffing up her chest as she spoke, "Lump will not fall for your smooth-talkery. She knows that trick, but she will accept the compliment. You know Lump's name now, but what is yours, newcomer?"

"I'm … uuuuugggg," said Steve, trying to think of a name. Eli was about to whisper something, probably a suggestion, but Steve pinched the other boy's leg. They were already getting stares. They didn't need to seem even odder with having two voices.

“Uuugghh?” said the guard. “That is an old name. How many U’s does it have?”

“Um, I said … Gump??? Yes. I am Gump. One U, like Forrest Gump,” tried to joke Steve, shifting under the costume nervously. He threw a look at the barrels. Said troll was still there … starring at the closed barrels curiously. The girls hadn't been spotted, had they?

“I know not this Forrest Gump. Is he a battle hero?” asked Lump, shifting her hands to her hips as she raised a brow in question, regaining Steve's attention.

Laughing for a second, trying not to squeak in horror as the alley-troll picked up the barrel Claire had jumped in and started to walk away, Steve stumbled over his words, “Who? Oh yeah, um… Well, Forrest Gump was kind of a hero. I guess he was fearless, but not very smart.”

“Sounds like good tale, but why do you come to Troll Market? I have never heard of troll that cannot speak Trollish. It makes you even more suspicious,” said the guard, crossing her arms over her chest again.

Eli peeked down at Steve and the boys started making quick hand signals. Steve was waving at the barrels and the departing Claire. He was totally going to start panicking. Eli, not liking the growing frown on the female troll’s face, quickly spoke in the other teenager’s stead, “Magic! Its … because of magic. I wanted to learn … ugh … text-speak quickly and it made me forget … my Trollish?”

Now both town guards were staring at the costumed teens.

Not knowing what else to do, figuring it had to do with speaking in a different voice, he added, “It also changes my voice. Randomly. I even end up arguing with myself sometimes.”

Steve, facepalmed, but it seemed that the female troll was buying it as she hummed in acceptance, “This text-speak had a hefty price, it seems. So, you came for a magical cure? RotGut’s may have a Polyjuice, but anything stronger and you would need a mage or magic user. If you came here hearing of the magic boy, he is still training with the troll leader. He will probably be little help to you.”

Eli and Steve shared a glance under the costume. Eli even mouthed Jim and Toby’s names. If Steve and he were on the same page, remained to be seen.

“Yes,” finally spoke up Eli after some awkward hand signals with Steve. “We were speaking of the magic boy. It wouldn’t hurt for us to at least meet him, would it? Just to confirm that he’s here, *alive*, and unable to help us. If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

The female troll was still eyeballing him before she stated, “Your second voice is a smooth talker. I will be asking his handlers, and if they accept, you will be seeing Lump real soon. Lump likes how you smell and will escort you.”

“That would be wonderful, my fine troll lady,” said Eli awkwardly as the two troll guards walked away. Only once they were out of hearing range did Eli squeak, “Did a troll lady just ask us out on a date? I don’t know how I feel about this, Steve. I expect candles, rose petals and maybe matching corsages on my first date.”

Steve snorted and watched the female troll walk away, “Well … she’s really strong looking. Buffy even. We could do worse.”

Eli was silent for a moment, uncertain how to reply to that, “What does she being buffy have to do with anything, Steve?”

Feeling defensive, Steve started stomping in the opposite direction, “Nothing! Let’s just find the girls. Some distraction they were. We had to save our…selves.”

Steve and Eli both stared with wide eyes at the alley where the girls had gone. Not only was Claire’s barrel gone, but all of the barrels that had been there, including the ones Darci and Mary had jumped into, were gone.

Sighing, wondering once more why he was here, Steve grumbled, “Eli … its down to just the two of us. We’re so dead.”

…

“Uggghhh, why are there so many hills? I think he’s taking us on a death hike, Jim. He knows we’ll be thirsty and weak at the end, so when he makes the move to drown us, it’ll be like drowning land seals,” complained Toby as he stalled on the path, panting.

Jim, his footing sliding slightly, raised a brow, “Land seals? Toby, that makes no sense.”

Vendel, stalling on what basically was a goat trail at this point, turned around and leaned on his staff as he stared at the two boys. “Trust me,

tubby one, there are easier ways to rid myself of your whining. As for the river, the gathering pools are over this hill."

"Hill?" Toby bemoaned, "That's a cliff."

Jim merely laughed but didn't disagree, stalling for a moment when he felt a set of eyes on him. Looking down, he only saw the normal hustle and bustle of Troll Market. Merchants and denizens were going about their normal day down below. Frowning, he only moved forward when Toby finally stumbled past him.

It was probably nothing … or at least he hoped so.

Chapter End Notes

I love Steve especially since I know he likes kickass girls. Eli, as usual, is adorable, and it seems the Creepslayerz girls have decided to go on a misadventure. Overall, it's going as well as everyone thought it would. XD

Anyway, the Creepslayerz rescue attempt is getting pretty long so I'm just going to break it up into a three-parter for now. Plus, shorter chapters are easier for me to do and allow for much more regular updates. ^.^

And sorry if the proofread is lazy, I'm old and tired. XD

Cool-Ranch Your Doritos

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Going up the goat trail kind of felt like a death march with how many times Jim and Toby nearly slipped or had to press themselves against the face of a cliff. How Vendel was getting up the trail without issue was a mystery, but Toby was certain it was some kind of goat-magic. And yet, seeing the end location was almost worth it.

Almost …

Jim took off his boot and shook out a pebble while Toby basically faceplanted into the nearest pool of water to get a drink. Then and only then, did Jim admire the circular pools before them.

It was pretty, it really was. There were large pools of water being fed by a small bubbling underground spring, each pool flowing into each other like a slow-moving river. Almost all the pools were glowing, little crystals at the bottom. There were also giant mushrooms against some of the rock faces, finishing the look of the place while glowing snails lit up the walls like dim bulbs.

Jim was surprised that he had never seen this place before, but then again, this obviously wasn't a very well-visited spot. Also, Jim had been kept busy with training and not-dying in his last life. He hadn't had as much time as he would have liked to sightsee, especially the more obscure caverns of Troll Market.

Running his hand through his greasy hair, deciding the walk was kind of worth it if he got a bath out of it, Jim pulled off his other boot. Then a sock and another sock. Jim had just started on his shirt when Vendel cleared his throat.

"What are you doing, Seer Jim?"

"Taking a dip? That's why you brought us here, right? You did say it was cleansing water or something… or were you serious about drowning us and putting me out of my misery?" joked Jim, Toby finally coming up for air only to promptly overbalance and roll into the pool with a screech.

Vendel sighed at this and reached down into the water where bubbles

were forming, pulling Tobias back up. Toby merely spurted water out of his mouth like a fountain cherub, unconcerned, “These pools are not for swimming.”

Turning his attention back to Jim, Vendel put Toby down and clarified, “There are bathhouses in town, Young Seer. These cleansing pools are for spiritual purposes. Thus, the hike.”

“Trolls bathe?” asked Toby, sticking his feet back into the pool as he enjoyed the cool water.

Vendel glared at the now soaking wet teenager before he grumbled, “…There are more trolls than baths, and there is an unfortunate effect of sinking when one is stone.”

Toby made a disgusted face but Vendel ignored it as he turned his attention back to Jim, “As I was saying, Young Seer, we are not here for bathing. Running water from a clear spring or pool has many purifying properties since water is the element between all planes. Fire is also a tool for purification as one of the base elements, but only if you want to risk destroying the item. Burying works as well since earth is another element, but the wait can be centuries.”

Jim’s face squished up in worry but Vendel continued, “Now, since I don’t think you want to wait centuries or risk melting your amulet, we will cleanse it with water.”

Vendel then pulled Jim’s wrapped amulet from one of his pockets, offering the cloth-wrapped amulet to the teenager. The amulet immediately glinted brightly as if greeting an old friend.

Jim … was hesitant.

Pushing the amulet a little closer, knowing all too well that magical items of power could become riotous if ignored, he added, “Take it, Seer Jim. I, myself, found no obvious dark magic, but this will be a good lesson in cleansing for you regardless. Plus, it does not bode well for mages to ignore their tools or familiars. Such things can harbor grudges.”

Wincing, noting that the thing did seem to be dimming the longer he allowed it to hang there, Jim gingerly reached forward and took the cloth without touching the metal. Immediately, the amulet seemed to glow brighter as if happy to see him. Not knowing what else to do, the teenager looked up at Vendel. “What now?”

Tilting his head towards the dozen or so pools, Vendel added, “Now, pick a pool. One that’s not deep enough for the pudgy one to drown in. Then, pluck a mushroom cap. One big enough for you to place the amulet on it. In time your magic will be strong enough that you can use your own hands as the bridge between realms, but if a mushroom is not available other items like tree bark or lily pads will do.”

Nodding, Jim obeyed. He first plucked one of the mushroom tops and then picked a pool near the cliff-edge that overlooked Troll Market. It was one of the shallower ones and went up to his midriff when he stepped in. The water was cold but not as frigid as he expected.

“Good,” said Vendel, carefully placing his Hearthstone staff on the shore before he stepped in as well, standing before Jim as he continued to speak. “As I was saying, Young Seer, water is the bridge between all planes. We will be using these pools to cleanse any unwanted magic from your amulet. Basically, we are reintroducing it to the realm where the old gods rest. Likely, you will lose all the magic you have stored in the amulet given how unpracticed you are.”

Shrugging, figuring it couldn’t be that much magic, Jim accepted the loss.

“Alright, now put the amulet on the mushroom cap and place the mushroom on top of the water so that it floats. You will then cross your fingers over each other and repeat as I do. We are asking the old gods in Trollish to take back what is there’s as respectfully as we can. You must never say the magic within an item is evil … The old gods may become insulted. They made everything the way they wished it to be when it comes to magic. It is best not to insult them, Young Jim,” said Vendel as he waved for the boy to place the amulet and mushroom in the water before him.

Jim did so, swallowing thickly. Then, mushroom bobbing on the water, Vendel continued.

“Now, you must only push the mushroom and the item being cleansed under the water when the water ripples inward and towards the item being purified. That means that the other realm has cracked opened and will accept what is being offered. If the ripples are rushing in all directions or outward, we best try another pool. We do not want to accidentally open a doorway for darker things,” continued Vendel, cringing when Toby asked something from the sidelines, his mouth full of food. Where Toby kept finding snack food in Troll Market, was a mystery.

Vendel ignored him. He just wanted this lesson finished. He still had other things to teach the seer tonight.

“Now, repeat after me in Trollish. The words mean: I give back the blood to the old gods' veins. Please cleanse this item of any remains,” said Vendel, opening his mouth to only be interrupted as Toby finished his snack and slid into the water. It apparently was the deep end because Toby immediately started dog paddling.

“That’s a little morbid, don’t you think? Or is it like a magical blood donation?” asked Toby, paddling around the two like he was a purse dog.

Eye twitching, his patience almost dead, Vendel grabbed the stout teen and plopped him back on the edge, grumbling, “These pools are not for *swimming,* and the water must be *still*. Now, Young Jim, *please* repeat after me.”

Trollish spilled from the old troll’s mouth and Jim repeated. Even though he wasn’t the most fluent in Trollish, he knew enough to recognize the words and repeat them almost flawlessly. This continued until a most peculiar thing happened, the water started to ripple inward from the edges of the pool. The rate of the ripples grew faster and faster until Jim instinctively pushed the amulet under the water. The water immediately turned black as if he had just dropped a vial of ink into the pool. And from there it spread like it was corrupting the water, the ripples dragging it outward, and yet the second it touched the pool’s edges (Toby had pulled up his feet), it was gone.

Vendel hummed, “It seems there was something in there, likely from the blood magic incident or maybe the previous owner.”

Jim twitched at that, wearily catching the amulet before it completely sank to the bottom of the pool. “I can wear it though, right?”

“Yes, Seer Jim. Now, onto more important things,” said Vendel as he turned to the pool’s edge so that he could get out only to have Toby suddenly standing before them, smirking and stripped of any non-essential clothing.

“You are entirely right, V-man. Onto more important things now that Jim’s bling isn’t cursed. And do you want to know what those more important things are?” asked Toby, grinning at the two.

Ears falling back, already suspecting what was going to happen,

Vendel turned his head just in time for Toby to scream, “Cannonball!” and jump in, splashing water over them both. Jim immediately perked up, laughing like an excitable whelp as the two humans started splashing each other. Vendel was left standing in the pool, wet and miserable as the two teenagers swam and splashed around him.

Looking like a wet towel, fur sopping wet, Vendel sighed, “I suppose I was due for a bath anyway.”

…

An hour later, Jim and Toby were much cleaner and somewhat happy with their swim in the spiritual pools. Vendel, predictably, was grumpy because his fur was starting to dry and puffing up, making him look like a teddy bear. Jim and Toby thought it was hilarious. Vendel was less amused.

“I don’t know, V-man. I think poofy is a good look on you. It makes you look cuddly and approachable. And girls like cuddly, don’t they Jimbo?” asked Toby as the two teens followed Vendel down the goat-trail.

Jim, struggling not to laugh, agreed, “Yes … cuddly.”

The two teens then snickered behind the aging troll’s back causing Vendel to sigh and walk faster. He momentarily wondered if he could permanently rid himself of both nuisances without anyone noticing when he heard the shuffle of stone ahead. Someone was coming from around the bend, which was odd. The pools were not exactly a popular location for most trolls … given the ability to sink and the general dislike for cleanliness.

Drawing near the bend, wondering who it could be, Vendel nearly backed into the two teenagers when suddenly a small black-clad form slid around the bend, a plastic tool of some type in hand.

“Don’t twitch a claw! I’ve come for the teens.”

Vendel had to blink twice before he realized what he was looking at … the fuzzy leg-boots had thrown him off. It was a human whelp. A female from the sound of her voice.

Putting his paw up in what was meant to be a calming motion, his mind already forming a verbal lashing for Kanjigar and company because they *had* to be involved in this somehow, Vendel tried to speak, “Calm yourself, human child. I am Vende-”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say … or it could have had something to do with him shifting his staff and bowing his head forward.

Either way, Claire obviously on edge, pointed her squirt gun upwards and immediately sprayed garlic goo into the aging troll's eyes. Vendel barked in surprise at this and tripped back into one of the stone walls. Jim and Toby merely stood there flabbergasted for a moment before Claire slung the plastic gun onto her back and grabbed each of them by their wrists, dragging them along as she barked, "Just don't stand there gaping, we need to run!"

Not knowing what else to do, the two boys stumbled after her, leaving Vendel leaning against the stone wall.

Vendel, in turn, listened to their departing footsteps as he reached up and tried to wipe the garlicky concoction out of his eyes. It stung slightly, but mostly it had been more of a shock than anything.

"Let one human whelp in and next thing you know you have a herd of them," Vendel grumbled to himself, ready to shake his hand and rid himself of the garlic-infused goo. The old troll couldn't help but stall though when he caught an actual whiff of the concoction. Stalling, he sniffed the mixture before shrugging and licking one of his fingers.

Humming in surprise, Vendel mumbled to himself, "That is quite good though."

…

Claire had been horrified when her barrel had been originally picked up. Her lungs had stalled, and she contemplated jumping out and making a run for it, but the streets were too crowded. Plus, she didn't want to blow the other Creepslayerz cover, and they still didn't know what trolls in this troll city did to human kids. Eating them seemed unlikely since that was the angry black troll's thing, but she wasn't going to count on it. Maybe city trolls just liked cooking their humans first or maybe they stole human children and turned them into trolls or something. She wasn't taking anything off the table until she was sure.

The matter was made worse when her barrel was separated from Mary and Darci's barrels. Her troll was going in a completely different direction then the girls' troll. The only good thing was that the streets started to get less crowded, and then she saw it … two small forms. There were two human forms walking with a white-colored troll! She

had almost hopped out of the barrel right then and there, but instead, she merely watched where they were going. Finally, when the street was empty enough for her to grab onto an overhang, she slipped out of the barrel and headed towards the small trail the two teens had been walking on.

They didn't look like they were being held captive, but she was more than aware of what Stockholm Syndrome was ... And people say that romance novels have nothing informative to offer.

It had taken her longer than she wanted to sneak to the small trail, trolls from time to time sniffing the air whenever she was nearby. She didn't know if it was her human scent or what, but more than once she found herself hiding in crawl spaces or small crevasses. The troll city was full of them, which was why it was so easy for her to spray that white troll in the eyes and save her two fellow classmates. She knew all the good hiding places nearby.

She had to kick one or two of those mean little gnome-things out of the small abandoned cellar-like area, but she managed to get Jim and Toby to follow her with little complaint.

Toby was surprisingly the first to speak as the three teens all looked at each other in the cobweb and gnome infested little cellar. "Sooo … are you going to continue to hold Jim's hand or are you going to tell us what you're doing in Troll Market?"

Claire immediately gasped and released Jim's hand. She tried not to note that Jim actually looked disappointed when she let go.

Clearing her throat, she asked, "What am I doing here? Well, I came for answers and to save you two, but you two don't exactly look like captives to me. Are you captives or have you just been making your mom and nanna worry for nothing? The whole town is looking for you two!"

Toby winced at the accusation and Jim seemed to wilt, immediately rubbing a bracelet-like item on his arm.

Jim was the first to speak this time. "Well, we are *captives* … kind of. You see, it was either be saved by the Trollhunters or get eaten by Bular. And though I hate to worry my mom, I think it's better than being dead."

Toby quickly added more information as Claire continued to give them an accusing look. "And it's not like we can exactly leave. We

don't have one of those horn-gate-keys, and Jim's trapped by his cursed bling. Apparently, he needs to finish his wizards-driving school before they'll let him go out on his own."

Claire slowly unfolded her arms, suddenly taking on a worried expression. She stepped closer to Jim, painfully close, and lifted the amulet on his neck. She stared at it with furrowed brows even as the amulet twinkled playfully at her as if knowing this was the human girl its owner adored so much.

Jim, in turn, tried not to lean in and creepily smell her shampoo. He missed Claire so much that it hurt. Part of him still couldn't believe that she had come all the way down to Troll Market just for him. He had barely spoken to her before Troll Market came back to claim him. Maybe some things were fated to be.

"Oh, that's the wrong cursed jewelry. I mean, the necklace was cursed, but we like washed it an hour ago. I was talking about the bracelet," interfered Toby, trying not to smirk at the slight blush on his bestie's cheeks as Claire stood close to the taller boy. "It's like a child's leash. Jim can only go so far before being yanked back like a toddler. Can-of-jars and V-man want him to stay in Troll Market because they think he's a seer or mage or something. They say it's not safe above ground."

Claire released the amulet and then reached for the bracelet, holding Jim's wrist up as she ran her thumb over the metal, memorizing the figures carved there.

Toby wiggled his eyebrows at Jim as the brunette boy continued to blush. Jim, in turn, gave him a look that basically said, 'Don't mess this up for me.' It took a minute or two of Claire playing with the bracelet and lightly prying at it before she realized how close she was. Immediately blushing, she stepped back and pushed her hair behind her ear.

"Sorry about that. I was just seeing if I could read it. Maybe there's a password or something that can get it off," she said, awkwardly before looking at both of them and continuing, "Can't Jim just use a magic spell to get it off if he's a mage? I mean, I never believed in magic, but then Eli showed us a picture of that black troll and then that green little monster nearly stole Enrique. Now, here in Troll Market as you called it, I can't deny there's magic."

Jim immediately went stiff, his voice catching as a look of desperation took over his face. "The goblins nearly got Enrique?! Oh, no,*no*!

Kanjigar said he was going to deal with the Fetch. He promised. Are you sure it's the real Enrique?"

Claire, in turn, became rigid. "The *real* Enrique? What are you talking about? Did you know something was going to try and take him?! Were you involved?!"

Toby put up a hand, stalling Claire before she got all spicy, "Cool-Ranch your Doritos, Claire. That's why we're trapped down here to begin with. Jim knows the future. So, we tried to get the Fetch-thing that goblins use to steal children in order to save your brother. We got chased by said goblins and Bular the jerk-troll. Bucket-head and company saved us from being eaten. So now we're here."

Surprise entered the girl's eyes and she immediately looked at Jim, "I didn't catch all of that, but let me get this straight … Jim, you saw the future and tried to save my brother?"

Jim only had time to nod before the girl threw her arms around his neck, tears gathering in her eyes as she murmured in his ear, "Thank you."

She lingered there for a few seconds before she pulled away pushing his shoulder roughly as an angry expression stole her teary-eyed look, "But you should have asked me for help! He's my baby brother, I would have helped you two."

Trying not to chuckle, part of him missing angry-Claire, Jim smiled, "And would you have believed me if I said I knew the future and that there were trolls and goblins that wanted to steal or eat the citizens of Arcadia? When I told Toby, he thought they were purse-dogs and hipsters."

"Troll-sters," quickly corrected Toby. "And it sounded crazy town banana pants, Jim. Can you blame me?"

Jim shrugged, "No Tobes, I can't blame you. So, you understand now, right Claire? We didn't want to get you involved, but it seemed you still got involved anyway… Which brings me to my own question: how did you even get down here?"

Perking up, eyes widening as if she just remembered something, the girl burst out, "Oh no, I forgot about the rest of the Creepslayers! We have to find Mary, Darci, Eli, and Steve before some troll catches them!"

“Steve?” said Toby dumbly. “Why is he down here?”

“He’s part of the Creepslayerz. Your rescue party,” added Claire as she jumped onto an old storage box and peeked out of their little nook before turning back to look at the two boys. It was then that she really *looked* at them, raising a brow. “And that reminds me: what are you two wearing?”

Jim immediately looked down and put a hand over his eyes, completely mortified over the rugged remains of his cosplay costume. Toby, in turn, waved a hand at the black-clad girl with her fuzzy-Uggs.

“You’re one to talk fashion, Claire. Those fuzzy leg-pants don’t go with you’re spy-chic outfit at all.”

Claire could only laugh in agreement.

…

“Okay, Mare … one, two, three, go!” whispered Darci, the two girls rolling out of their barrels and next to a few storage crates lined against the wall. Darci then boosted the other girl out of a nearby window. The troll in the shop turned just in time to see the ragged curtain shift, but both girls were already outside and dusting themselves off as they crouched in a crooked alley.

“What are we going to do Darci?!” cried Mary, grabbing the other girl by the shirt before she whined, “We got separated from the others and my phone doesn’t have service down here!”

Darci shook the nearly hysteric girl, telling her, “Calm down, Mare. Panicking will get you nothing except smeared mascara.”

Mary immediately titled her head back, blinking her eyes rapidly to dry them before looking back at her companion. “Is my makeup good? Did I ruin my mascara? I can’t record my final moments with smeared mascara, Darci.”

Looking at her friend’s face, Darci nodded, “It still looks good. In fact, your makeup looks great. Did you put it on before coming down here?”

“D-yuh,” said Mary as she rolled her eyes. “If I was going to make one of those stupid found-tapes before dying, I wanted to look good doing it. I’m going to be a pretty, dead, and famous person. Not an ugly,

smeared-makeup, and dead famous person, Darci. I have standards."

"Thank god for standards," murmured Darci to herself as she released the other girl and looked towards the exits for the alley. "Okay, we need a plan, Mary. We don't have the gate-rock to get out of the city, so we need to find the others."

Mary's eyes got squinty like she was going to start crying again, "But that was forever ago, and that stupid troll carried our barrels around half the town. We'll never find them before some random troll catches us. Humans obviously aren't supposed to be down here."

Frowning at the other teenager, looking back at the alley and the random piles of junk there, Darci tried to think. "Well, trolls are real, and those weird little pointy hat guys are also real. They're probably gnomes. Then there was that green thing that tried to steal Claire's brother. Eli thought they were some kind of orc or goblin according to Claire's description."

"Yeah, I get that there are things that go bump in the night, Darci. How does that help us now?" asked Mary.

"Well," continued Darci, a theory hitting her. "If those things are real, I can only presume that things like fairies and elves are real … As well as other cave-dwelling magical species."

Darci stood up at that, walking to an old pile of discarded weapons and armor. She then turned to Mary holding a dented shield with a blocky humanoid face on it. The face looked more human than trollish though obviously, it was too stout to be human. "That means we might be able to disguise ourselves as something else until we find Eli and the others. We can use the rug-Uggs to make ourselves look like dwarves."

Mary's lip curled up. "Dwarves? You mean like in Sleeping Beauty? I hate whistling."

Darci rolled her eyes, grabbing a horned helm and a few other broken things from the pile. "Not exactly, traditional dwarves wear armor and have beards. They are short and humanoid in shape. We could use our carpets as beards, wear some old armor, burlap sacks, and just … walk-on out of here. The trolls already fell for one of our costumes. Why not this one?"

Despite herself, Mary sneered at her carpet-boots. "I have to wear this … on my face? And a burlap sack? Are you trying to kill my social

life, Darci?"

Throwing a few bags and random pieces of fabric at the girl, Darci rolled her eyes, "Its better than being famous-dead or captured, Mare. Now, rip up your boots and make us some beards. We're going to troll some trolls."

…

Kanjigar *immediately* regretted leaving the group of human whelps alone in the woods. Not because he was overly concerned about Bular attacking a group of teenagers, Bular preferred easy meals, but because of the scent he found around the house from the *Kidnapping Interrupted: Sister Hero* article. He knew that smell. It smelled like one of the female whelps that they had passed in the woods. Apparently, the female whelp was the sister mentioned in the article.

Cursing softly to himself, the two large trolls turned around and headed back into the woods. The whelps had a bit of a head start. It wasn't a huge head start but it was enough. Bular was known for eating witnesses, and Kanjigar would not allow that brute to have another child.

"Hurry, Aaarrrgghh. Hopefully, they haven't gotten far. We need to find that girl before Bular does," said Kanjigar as he jumped over a fallen log in the forest, disturbing a family of raccoons as they ran away in fear. He was following the teenager's scent now, Aaarrrgghh rumbling beside him that something smelled good, when he noticed an oddity in the clearing ahead.

It was a black mass just under the darkness of the trees … and it had red eyes.

Without hesitation Kanjigar called his armor forward, his sword drawn and lighting up the small clearing as he slid to a halt in the damp grass. "Show yourself! I know it is you Bular, Son of Gunmar the Black."

The sound of a neck cracking could be heard like the figure was stretching before a confrontation. And with that, Bular stepped completely into the clearing, snorting hot air into the night and blowing away a gathering of fireflies. Squinting his eyes momentarily as if the light of the amulet hurt to look upon, Bular grinned viciously before mockingly adding, "Well, well, well. Look what I've come across on my midnight stroll. Kanjigar the Coward and his pet, the *traitor*."

Eyes gaining a hard glint, Kanjigar shifted his stance from one of defense to one of offense. “Yield Bular, and I will show leniency if you surrender. Your father’s crusade does not need to be your own.”

Chuckling at that, the dark troll slowly walked around the clearing’s edge, his voice a threatening purr, “We are all our fathers’ sons, aren’t we Kanjigar? But tell me, how is your son? It looks like he recovered well. Perhaps I should have beaten his head in a little more.”

Kanjigar gripped the handle of Daylight tighter and snorted in anger but did not rise to the bait this time. Instead, he kept his eyes on the dark figure’s movements. He would not be distracted by Bular’s venomous words. It nearly got him killed under that bridge *twice*, and he would not allow it to happen again.

“Hmm, you seem upset? I take it I left a few marks?” chuckled Bular as he reached over his shoulder, slowly pulling his blade *Dire* forward, the metal singing as if to announce how sharp it was. “And speaking of marks … you seem different today. You barely could hold your sword the other night and now you stand with such confidence. What happened to your injuries Kanjigar?”

“I wasn’t aware you held curiosity for the healing arts, Bular. Taking life instead of securing it has never seemed to be an interest of yours,” added the Trollhunter, sliding his stance smoothly as he kept an eye on his opponent. Bular generally didn’t give in to banter. He was usually quick to anger and even faster to react, but sometimes he would get like this. A young, crafty mind that Gunmar had wasted.

Sometimes, secretly, Kanjigar pitied the dark troll. Bular had had no choice in his future when he was a whelp. He was born to be a weapon of his father. He was a servant, a useful tool, and nothing more.

“It does when something odd is going on around here, *Kanjigar*,” growled Bular, his red eyes becoming slits. “The interloper rescuing you from the sun, your son running into me at the school, the interloper finding his way to the museum … and you *capturing* a bridge piece. Now you stand before me, previously with crippling sun-stains, but now you seem *fine*. You rarely departed from your usual routes, Trollhunter. You were complacent, but now you’ve changed your behavior and I want to know why.”

Trying not to stiffen at the mention of the ‘interloper’ because Bular did not need to know there was a young and corruptible seer under

Arcadia, Kanjigar gave a dry and humorless laugh. “Everything you’ve mentioned is an aftereffect of your own foolhardiness, Bular. After our fight under the bridge, I realized my error ... or my *complacency* as you call it. It will *not* happen again.”

Bular’s red glare was unwavering, a suspicious glint in his eyes. Apparently, he was unaffected by Kanjigar’s taunt and didn’t rush into battle. Instead, he snorted, reaching over his shoulder and pulling out his second sword, *Dread,* free. “If you will not give me answers, I will cut them out of you. Now, remind me, was it the left shoulder or the right shoulder I was going to take first?”

Kanjigar, recalling his near defeat, was surprised to hear Aaarrrgghh growl beside him. It was then that he remembered that he as not alone. He still hadn’t asked Aaarrrgghh about his vow and what he still planned to uphold, but he felt confident in staying, “Neither. It will be you who is slain tonight if you attack, Bular. There are two of us and only *one* of you.”

Sweeping his gaze from one troll to the other, as if weighing the odds, Bular didn’t even get to twitch when suddenly a yelping warriors-cry filled the woods. Blinky ran into the clearing while holding two – dwarkstones?!- which he immediately tossed in Bular’s direction.

Instantaneously, all the trolls in clearing dodged into the tree line like scattering birds. Kanjigar and Aaarrrgghh had barely gotten back to their feet when Blinky was pulling them forward and screaming for them to run!

The explosion behind the Trollhunters was quite cinematic-worthy and the only thing that would have made it better would be if all the trolls were wearing sunglasses and slow-walking away. As it was, they were running instead, Blinky urging them on as he chatted insistently.

“Oh, thank Deya, I found both of you. Troll Market has gone crazy during your short absence,” said Blinky as he motioned in the direction of the bridge.

Already moving, leaving Bular to rage in the forest behind them, Kanjigar asked, “I’d ask where you got the dwarkstones, Blinky, but I feel we have more pressing concerns. What has happened to Troll Market? Has it been attacked? Is there another beast loose in the streets?”

Placing two hands on his cheeks as if horrified by what he was about to say, Blinky continued to run as he admitted, “It’s so much worse,

Master Kanjigar. An unknown troll somehow got ahold of a horngazel and then proceeded to steal the affections of the much-adored Lump. Can you imagine?! Then, seemingly out of nowhere, dwarves showed up in Troll Market?! Can you believe it?*Dwarves*?! Of all the nerve. I wouldn't be surprised if they are here to criticize our stonework and then try to mine the Hearthstone. The *barbarians*."

Kanjigar raised a brow at that. "The dwarves are a bit concerning, Blinky, but rumors about Lump's love life are hardly worth this much theatre. How are those two things worse than if Troll Market had been attacked?"

Wincing, Blinky admitted, "You are correct, old friend. Those are secondary problems you will have to deal with. Vendel sent me. Apparently, he was attacked by an unknown human *in* Troll Market. Said human then processed to abduct both Seer Jim and Young Tobias. The town guard has been looking everywhere for the three of them, but we haven't found them!"

At that, Kanjigar nearly tripped over his own feet, stumbling awkwardly to catch himself before he picked up the pace.

"Blinky, perhaps you should have started with that first?!" the blue troll grumbled, the transit bridge seeming so painfully far away, especially when a roar of rage from Bular echoed behind them.

"I've found that it's always best to slowly work into bad news, Master Kanjigar. It seems you were already having a trying evening the way it was," was all Blinky could say, Aaarrrgghh humming in agreement beside him.

Chapter End Notes

Hello loves, I hope everyone enjoyed the conclusion of 3Below! Steve's so adorable, and I personally can't wait for the Wizards segment.

Anyway, as for this chapter, I know it wasn't as zany as the last chapter, but I still feel like it was fun. I really enjoyed writing the banter between Bular and Kanjigar. They have a complicated rivalry and I enjoy poking at it. Furthermore, I now really want to see Bular in a cute little nurse's hat. He'd make a great healer. XD

I really want that now. I need a healer-Bular AU. >.>

Uncle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I have a feeling that this was a terrible idea,” whispered Darci as the two girls looked up at a very angry troll.

“Are you going to try and take our Hearthstone? Or have you come to mock our stonework?” asked the angry troll, a crowed of other angry trolls gathering behind him. “We are not afraid of your picks and stone magic, little men. Dwarves are not welcome here!”

“Hey,” defended Mary as she popped up from behind her Darci-shield. “We are wo*men*. Just because we have *blagh*-beards doesn’t give you the right to label us!”

The trolls now started to look confused and started murmuring in Trollish amongst each other. There were a few English verses like, ‘Do the females have beards, I don’t know if I’ve seen one before,’ and other worrying phrases like, ‘And don’t the mountain dwellers generally stay to the mountains?’. Their cover was probably going to be blown in t-minus ten seconds.

Darci, slowly backing up, glared at Mary, “Is this really the time and place to push gender equality, Mare? You are blowing our cover.”

“Sorry,” murmured the other girl as she started to back up as well. “And it doesn’t seem like a good cover anyway. They are about to lynch us.”

Frowning, Darci winced as the trolls all turned to seemingly stare at them. Apparently, they noticed that the girls were about to make a run for it.

“Should we run now?”

“Yeah, we should run now,” agreed Darci, both girls turning just in time to immediately slam right into something hard and metal. Both teens landed on their butts and, looking up, both girls couldn’t help but gasp. So that was what all the trolls were looking at … the glowing armor guy. And said armor guy was now glaring down at the two of them, arms crossed over his broad chest.

The blue, armored troll said something in a deep gruff language, different from the Trollish the girls had been hearing. It probably was Dwarvish. When the girls gave each other a confused look, the armored troll spoke again, slower. When they still didn't respond, he finally used English.

"I questioned the Mountain King's honor? Have you nothing to say? Did he break his vow to troll kind?" finally asked Kanjigar, angrily. "You act as if you don't even know Dwarvish."

The girls both shared a guilty looked and recognition started to fill the large troll's face. The human that stole Seer Jim and Young Tobias … Where there was one human, there generally were more. Humans were social creatures after all. The dark had forced their kind to be that way when the world was young.

Aaarrrgghh confirmed his suspicions as the burly troll came forward, sniffing the two figures. He then hummed and stated, "Smell good. Like from the forest. The ones with fuzzy legs."

And then it clicked.

Reaching forward, Kanjigar grasped the two beards (a grave insult for real Dwarves) and tugged. The fake beards came off with little effort leaving two round-faced, human whelps. Their scents were seemingly intermingled with this garlic and old rug smell. He could see why they were overlooked by most of the trolls in the city. Nonetheless, Kanjigar sighed in resignation and ran a hand down his face.

Mary and Darci, meanwhile, gasped as they lost their fake beards.

"We're so dead!"

"Run, Mare!"

And, diving between Kanjigar's legs before he could even finish his sigh, the two girls took off running like their butts were on fire.

Kanjigar groaned like this was a horrible chore before promptly taking chase. Just what Troll Market needed, more human whelps.

…

"My feet are starting to kill me Eli. How about I ride on your shoulders for a while?" groused Steve as he walked down a random street. The two boys had decided that the best course of action was to

look for the girls. Any humans, actually.

Apparently, they were nearly invisible in their costume. So, Eli decided to make a rough map of the area as they searched … Just in case they had to come back tomorrow. Neither of the boys wanted to think that way, that there would be three more missing person posters tomorrow, but they were the only ones with the key out of this place.

Looking down from his part of the costume, Eli frowned, “Let’s take an energy break then Steve. Exhaustion won’t help us find the girls.”

If the trolls in the area noticed that the ‘new troll’ suddenly lost about three feet in height and gained two extra legs as it spoke to itself in a comfy corner, they said nothing. Steve and Eli had merely sat down on the stone steps out of the way, granola bars and juicy boxes slowly being consumed under their costume.

“Juicy boxes are for five-year old’s,” grumbled Steve, even though he was already on his second one.

“My mom packed them,” whined Eli as he chewed on a carrot.

Snorting, Steven turned to the other boy under the rug costume, “Your mom packed snacks for a trip into a magical, troll cave?”

“I … didn’t exactly say I was taking a trip to a magical, troll cave,” said Eli with a squeak. “She would have never let me go.”

“You’re such a momma’s boy.” Steve snorted, before promptly adding, “Magical, troll cave kind of sounds like a drug den or something when you say it that way anyway. So, it’s probably best you didn’t tell her.”

Eli just gave him a look.

And with that, the two boys sat silently once again, sipping on their juice boxes. Eli seemed to battle with himself as if he was trying to think of what to say. The shorter boy was squirming nonstop.

Finally, Steve couldn’t take it anymore when the squirming caused him to drop his juicy box, “Ugh. What is your problem buttsnack?”

“Well … I have to pee,” said the boy awkwardly.

Steve would have sneered if he didn’t have to admit, “Fine. I have to pee too. And you are walking from now on, Pepperjack… For obvious reasons.”

…

Finding a public bathroom was a bit of a challenge … mostly because almost everything was written in Trollish and because the public bathroom sign looked like a troll screaming at a giant toilet that was trying to eat them. The two boys had stared at the outhouse sign, wondering if they could find a safer spot in an alley.

In the end, their bladders decided and the two teens shuffling into the giant outhouse while Steven guarded the door.

“Are you done yet, Pepperjack! That last juicy box is killing me,” groused Steve as he continued to glare at the outhouse door, his back to the other boy.

“Sorry,” said Eli. “I just get nervous when other people are watching. Plus … I’m kind of scared of falling in Steve. These outhouse holes look bottomless, and it’s kind of weird that there are four of them in here.”

Steve threw his hands up in irritation, “Just go, Pepperjack! I’m not even looking. Just go or I’ll push you in, got it! Then we'll know for certain if they're bottomless!"

“But you can hear me,” complained the other boy.

Steve was about to turn around when suddenly the plank door was thrown open, something short pushing itself inside. The blond immediately barked in surprise and tripped backward, falling into one of the holes. He barely managed to brace himself from falling completely in. Eli, in turn, jumped in surprise and finally found the motivation to pee.

Blinking from his almost death hole (and what an embarrassing death fall that would have been), Steve recognized what had entered, “Domzalski, is that you? What are you wearing?”

Looking down at the worn remains of the cosplay shirt, Toby laughed nervously, “Ah ... yeah. It's my cosplay costume, but that’s not the issue. What are you two doing.”

Steve looked around the troll restroom, Eli still peeing awkwardly in the corner, before he groused. “I think it’s rather obvious, Domzalski … and don’t you dare pee in my direction Pepperjack.”

“Right,” said Tobias awkwardly. “Anyway, Claire said you were in

Troll Market, but I didn't believe it until we saw that derpy costume stumble in here … You two really take a long time to pee, by the way."

Frowning, Steve grumbled, "You can blame Pepperjack for that. Now get me out of this hole! I don't want to even think of what's down there."

…

A few minutes later, the group of teenagers and the troll costume all found themselves on the roof of one of the stone dwells, looking down at the streets below like a bunch of wayward pigeons.

"I still can't believe they fell for this," groused Jim in disbelief as he looked back at the mammoth-like disguise. "It's so unbelievable. I mean, I've never seen a troll with four sets of legs. Have you Toby?"

Toby, sucking on a juicy box, waved a hand, "I don't judge, Jimbo … except for the smell of this thing. Its like dust and ranch dressing, which … given trolls' sense of smell, might be why you were getting a free pass through Troll Market."

Eli threw his hand up, "Success! I knew the garlic goo would be useful."

"That's good to know, "added Claire, now wondering if her goo spray gun was any use as a weapon. "Now, we need to find Mary and Darci, and we still need to get that cursed bracelet off Jim. Steve, do you still have that can of cheese whiz you decided to bring as a snack? I have an idea."

The bulky boy raised a brow and reached for the small pack he had brought, mournfully handing the artificial cheese to the girl.

"First off, I'd like to point out that this isn't really food," said Claire, before turning to Jim. "Now give me your hand Jim. Maybe we can use the cheese to help you slip out of it and then we can leave."

"Tried it," echoed the two boys in unison, Toby adding, "The troll guards told us to stop playing with our food after I stuck Jim's hand in a bowl of living slimes. To say the least, it didn't work."

Jim's eye twitched in remembrance and the three newcomers could only stare on, alarmed.

"... Okay," finally said Claire as that mental image faded away, the girl allowing Toby to steal the canned cheese from her. "How about cutting the band off? Or maybe snapping it with something?"

"Tried it," echoed the two boys, the other three teenagers now giving the two cosplayers a look. "What? Troll supervision isn't the best and don't even ask about magic again. Last time Jim used magic wrong, it brought a giant plant monster to life and we were almost eaten."

The three newcomers were gobsmacked until Eli suddenly beamed, "Jim you have magic?!"

Rubbing the back of his head, Jim shrugged, "I guess. I … uh … found out about the future and saved Troll Market's champion, the Trollhunter, with it. I then, stupidly, gave away that I knew the future by giving him some prophecy-styled warnings. Apparently, the trolls all thought I was some hapless seer-wizard and are now keeping me down here to keep me safe and so that I can learn magic correctly."

Eli looked like he was about to implode, the boy gushing, "I was right! I was right about there being wizards! And Jim, you are a wizard! This is amazing!"

"Actually," interjected Jim. "I haven't even earned the title of mage. So, I'm not really a wizard."

"Wait, wait, wait," interrupted Steve before Eli could gush all over the not-wizard, "You said *see the future*, right?"

Jim, twitching slightly, grumbled, "I *lived* the future actually."

"Same thing," said Steve, leaning in. "So, tell me, do you know all the answers to Senor Uhl's next exam?"

Toby, mouth open and filled with enough cheese to choke a small cat, perked up.

Frowning, wondering if he should tell everyone that he had been nearly failing in most of his classes, the ex-Trollhunter got rescued from answering when a scream echoed through the neighborhood. It was kind of high pitched and wheezy. Not a roar like trolls were known for.

Quickly, all the teenager's ran to the west side of the roof and peered down, the source of the noise was quickly notable as trolls stepped out of the way in the street below.

“I don’t want to die ugly!” cried Mary as she stumbled over the stone walkway, nearly falling on her face if it wasn’t for Darci.

“We are not going to die!” grunted Darci as she forced the other girl back to her feet. “Come on, we have to keep moving. That armor guy is way fast.”

Jim, acting on instinct, turned to the other teenagers, “Toby, take them to the exit. I’m going to see if I can get Darci and Mary before someone catches them.”

Toby, seeing what was happening three steps ahead, waved his hands. “Wait. No, go, Jimbo. You can’t split the team while in the dungeon. We are not just going to finish the level without figuring out how to take off the band. We are not leaving you in Troll Market.”

Jim stalled at the roof’s edge, ready to jump off. His cosplay jacket even seemed to catch air from an updraft that made him look like a brooding vigilante for a second.

“Sorry, Toby. Everyone else's safety comes first. Even though I'm not a hero anymore ... I still have responsibilities, I guess. We'll try to figure out the boundary band before we leave,” said Jim, his hero’s resolve taking over. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

And with a brotherly wrist grasp like they were two warriors heading off to separate battlefields, Jim left Toby and jumped down onto the stone eave. He slid down the stony incline of the structure before he fell into a roll on the street, his shoulder taking the brunt of the impact. He was then up and running before he even lost the inertia of his fall.

Eli and Steve were both left gapping at Jim’s parkour.

“Wow, Jim’s hardcore,” gushed Eli in awe, peering over the roof like a fanboy.

Steve merely frowned and crossed his arms over his chest, feeling a bit outclassed. Not that it mattered. It wasn’t like Eli was becoming his friend or anything.

Toby, in turn, looked back at the other teenagers and raised his fist, “Let’s get this troll-bus on a roll. Calling dibs on the front.”

Again, Steve felt belittled, “Hey, I’m supposed to be in the front.”

“Do you know your way around Troll Market?”

“No,” admitted Steve bitterly.

“Then everyone on-board the Toby train!” cheered Toby, a many-legged, mammoth-troll-rug-abomination making its way down into the street a few minutes later.

…

Mary and Darci squealed as some wild man suddenly rolled in front of them and their escape route. Immediately, Darci tried to hit the instigator in the face as he started to stand up, only to have the figure stumble out of her punch.

For a moment, the two girls stared at the scruffy man … No, it was a teenager, and with that recognition dawned on them.

“Jim is that you?” asked Darci, stepping forward as if to poke him and make sure he was real.

“First off, Darci that was a great punch but don’t ever tuck in your thumb unless you want to break your thumb,” said Jim as he rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, “Otherwise, we need to hide. Trolls will always outrun you in the end.”

That said, Jim suddenly dashed into a small crevasse between two stone buildings, waving for the girls to follow as he was gobbled up by the shadows. The two girls shared a horrified glance before promptly following, the tight alley nearly squeezing them as they shuffled in. The only thing that would have been comfortable in this tight space would be a goblin, especially when the tight alley led into a cross section, branching out like a Lichtenberg figure.

“Jim? Have you been living in this troll town this whole time? Hiding like a wild boy, because it sure looks like you have,” comment Mary as Jim took seemingly a random direction.

Humming, as if thinking of an answer, Jim shrugged, “Hiding? Not really. I am more of a *guest* of Troll Market.”

“Guest?” questioned Darci, her eyes going wide before a few horrible thoughts came to her, “Is that a cheeky way of saying they were going to eat you? Or are the kidnapped kids being turned into trolls? Is that where new trolls come from? Do they make you drink troll potions?! Is that why all the kids disappeared in the Milk Carton Epidemic? Is

that going to start to happen all over again?"

Mary gapped behind her friend, "What?! I don't want to be an ugly troll!"

Jim ignored Mary's petty hysteria and merely said, "Milk Carton Epidemic? I've never heard of it. And as for eating us: no. Only dark trolls do that kind of thing. And no, humans can't turn into trolls. At least I don't think they can. Trolls are just made the *normal* way, I think."

"Then why are you their guest?" questioned Darci, talking if only to ignore the growing feeling of claustrophobia.

The teenager in front sighed and then seemed to think about it for a moment, "I'm a … magic-user. They think I'll going to go evil or something if I'm not somewhat supervised and properly taught magic."

"Magic? Jeeze Jim, I always knew you were a geek, but now this just proves it," added Mary, wincing as her hair snagged a piece of stone in a show of instant-karma. "And are we done with this terrible, little maze yet? It's ruining my hair."

"Almost," said Jim, turning one more corner before he peeked out. "Okay. I said we would meet the others near the exit. It's just around this building. We'll hide under the stone steps if we get their first. Now, I need you both to keep low and to the shadows. Everyone in Troll Market is probably on high alert right now."

Then, glancing around once more, the teenagers all scampered out of the tiny alley like quick-legged monkeys. They slid against stone walls and behind barrels like they were in some kind of spy movie. Luckily, they still hadn't been spotted and were drawing nearer and nearer to the exit. Mary nearly cheered when they saw their dopey-eyed disguise shifting awkwardly near the exit.

Yet, when they were mere yards from having some kind of weird group hug (mostly the girls and probably Eli) Jim barked in surprise as he was jerked back. He landed on his back with a huff and immediately cursed himself. He had been so caught up with the whole rescue mission that he had momentarily forgotten about the stupid boundary band. He immediately covered his face with his hands and screamed in frustration.

Nothing could ever be easy, could it?

“Jim! What happened?!” cried Darci as she slid to a stop, trying to help Jim up.

“Oh, fudge knuckles, we forgot about that stupid wrist thing,” said Claire as she rushed from underneath the disguise, Toby and Eli following after which left the toll costume to deflate over Steve. The blond boy sighed as if resignation before he abandoned the troll costume as well so that everyone was now standing around or knelt next to Jim. Everyone was instantly arguing about what to do and how to get it off before the trolls caught up with them. Jim honestly looked resigned to his fate, like he had accepted that this would happen … that this was *always* going to happen.

“I was a Ranger Scout,” interrupted Eli as the other squabbled, pulling something out of his bag. “I wasn’t very good at it and mom made me quit because I kept coming back with poison ivy, but I got my badge for pocketknife safety.”

For a second all the teenagers stalled as they started at the small blade. Jim and Toby had tried some dull silverware, but not an actual knife …

“I don’t think that will work,” said Jim, wearily. “Toby and I tried some old silverware to cut it off when we weren’t be supervised, which honestly makes me wonder how good trolls are at child-rearing, but all the band did was tighten. It’ll probably cut me before it cuts through the band.”

“Well,” piped in Steve as he made a chopping sign with his hand. “We could just … you know … cut off your hand. Survivalists do that kind of stuff in survival shows.”

“Steve!” barked Claire, flabbergast. “We are not sawing off Jim’s hand!”

“What?” quickly defended the blonde. “We can just take it with us and ice it or something. Your mom’s a doctor, right? She’ll just sew it back on.”

Claire continued to gape in horror while Toby waved his arms in the air, “Are you crazy town banana pants? This isn’t a reenactment of the *Evil Dead*. What if the hand doesn’t, like, stay fresh or accidentally performs blood magic on itself and runs off? Jim can’t go around with a chainsaw for a hand!”

At this point, Jim was starting to look uncomfortable, pulling his hand

towards his chest as he sat up. “Guys, it’s okay. I kind of knew this was going to happen. Toby just ... go with them. Talk to my mom. I’ll be-“

“There you are! I knew you were heading towards the stairs!” came a bellow as a rolling spiky ball of death suddenly careened off a nearby roof, crashing before the teens and sending bits of rock everywhere. A second later Draal unfolded before the teenagers with a huff, his breathing heavy as he glared at all of them. He likely rolled the whole way here and he defiantly wasn’t happy.

“You will not be permitted to leave Troll Market. Now come with me, fleshlings,” growled Draal, his yellow and red eyes roaming over the group before landing on Jim and Toby, “Of course you two were involved in this whole debacle. I expect this of the chubby one, but Seer Jim you seemed far to honor-bound for all of this.”

Bristling at the honor comment, Jim stood up. He then pushed the other teens behind him and towards the crystal stairs before Toby could even start an argument.

“They came down here to rescue me. How is that dishonorable, Draal?! And what is so wrong with wanting to go home?” barked Jim angrily, waving the other teens towards the stairs, the pocketknife forgotten.

Sighing, not wanting to anger the seer, especially because he kind of liked Jim, Draal wilted slightly, “Seer Jim, I meant no offense, but for the safety of Troll Market and you … I cannot allow them to leave. I will not harm them if they come quietly.”

The troll then took a step forward like he was going to herd the teenagers away from the stairs when Jim suddenly stepped in front of him, adding, “You can’t tell me that Troll Market wants more teenagers? Vendel can barely stand Toby.”

“Hey,” said Toby, slightly insulted.

“Sorry Tobes,” called Jim before he looked Draal back in the eye, awaiting his response. “Besides, two kids might be overlooked but when nearly half of a class goes missing, people are going to question things.”

Snorting again, Draal grumbled, “I agree … but Vendel will probably make them forget. I’ve heard it’s been done before with the Hearthstone’s light. They will remember none of this.”

The teenagers on the step all looked horrified but not as much as Jim, "What?! You can't do that! Please just let them go, Draal. They won't say anything. They promise."

"We sure won't," agreed Steve. The boy twitching as Draal's red and yellow eyes swept over him.

Shaking his head, giving Jim an apologetic look, Draal continued, "I must protect Troll Market. Perhaps if they can convince Vendel, he will allow them to remember, but I doubt so many could keep a secret. If it was Tobias, I would let him leave, but these others …I know nothing of them."

Draal looked the teenagers up and down, his face settling into a frown. He obviously didn't trust them.

Looking back and forth as Draal started to walk around him, Jim grabbed the larger troll by one of his arm spikes, his voice breaking slightly, "W-wait. I'll call *uncle*. I'll let you win."

For a moment, Draal was still, his eyes wide before he snorted and shook his head, "That is not how I want to earn that answer, Seer Jim. I will earn it in our next duel."

"But you want to know, don't you?" asked Jim, his voice wavering for a moment. "I'm not putting that information up for wager again. I shouldn't have to begin with. I was going to take that Trollhunter's identity to the grave with me."

Jim licked his lips, even as he watched Toby shake his head in the background, "I will tell you if you let them go. They'll keep a secret … They must for their own protection from the changelings. Please, I just want my mom to know I'm okay. Let Toby and them go."

Looking between the teenagers and the seer, Draal felt himself being ripped in two. He wanted to be loyal to Troll Market and his father, but Jim was the Seer, a future Wizard if everything worked out. Plus, the identity of the next Trollhunter would be invaluable information. Perhaps it really was him and his father would praise him for being the next Trollhunter. But if it was someone else … maybe Draal could learn how to better himself.

Sighing, part of him knowing it was wrong, selfish even, the blue troll relented, "I accept your bargain, Seer Jim. I will not chase them a step further … I cannot attest to what my father or the others will do though. So, if they are going to go, they need to go now. And let it be

known that if they do tell the world of trolls … the changelings will likely end them. They need to hide their presence as much as we do, but they will kill for it."

Jim looked relieved while the teenagers on the steps looked ill. No one had given much thought about the changelings … until now.

"Jim, we can't leave you," added Claire, stepping forward only to have Jim turn sharply and shake his head. "And what about my baby brother? Will they come for him again? Is the Milk Carton Epidemic going to happen again? *We* need answers."

"The Trollhunter will deal with the Fetch and if you stay quiet, the changelings won't notice any of you. You don't have anything they want. Toby will fill you in where he can," said Jim, looking away as he added. "As for me, for now, I … I am staying in Troll Market. I uphold my vows. I will learn enough magic to defend myself and earn my way back to the surface. Until then, I only ask that you keep this all to yourselves."

Jim's voice nearly broke as he softly continued, "And Toby … please tell my mom I'm okay, and I will make my way back to her. She might not believe you. She might even think you're crazy, but please tell her."

Toby was already sniffling, before he wiped his nose with his sleeve and blubbered, "I promise, Jimbo. I promise."

Nodding, promising not to start crying until the others couldn't see him, Jim almost growled, "*Now go*."

And with that the rest of the teenagers reluctantly started to climb the stairs, leaving Jim alone with Draal. Draal at least had the decency to look away when a small sob escaped the boy. Jim quickly covered it up though by taking in three deep breaths and wiping his eyes. He then turned to Draal, his eyes red. "I'm just going to treat this like ripping off a band aid, I guess. You'll probably hate me all over again, but I made a deal."

Frowning, wondering why he would hate Jim for anything, Draal was about to interrupt when Jim suddenly blurted out, "It was me. I … I was the Trollhunter after your father."

Draal could only stand there, his jaw slightly ajar.

"W-what?"

Jim's hands had become fists at this point, his gaze on the ground as he added, "It was an accident. I found the amulet in the sunlight … I didn't even want it in the beginning."

At this Jim stilled, his voice barely a whisper, "But if it's any consolation, I messed up so, so, bad that that timeline had to be *erased*. I probably was the worst Trollhunter in history. *Please*, all I ask, is that you don't tell the others."

The blue troll was in so much shock he could only stand there looking down at this skinny rail in disbelief. It didn't make *sense*. Why would the amulet choose a *mere human* over someone like him or at least another troll?! Blinky would have been better … probably.

Was he not strong enough?

Was he not skilled enough?

Was he secretly a failure?

… Or maybe he was a cripple? Jim had said something odd about his arm that one time by the waterfall.

Beside himself, Draal turned his gaze to his hands and swallowed. For the first time … Draal was afraid of what the future might bring.

"Draal? What happened?" suddenly came a shout from behind them, Kanjigar ripping his son out of his trance as he rushed over to the two. "I see you found Seer Jim, but where are the other human whelps? Did you see them as well?"

Moving his mouth as if he was stuck on autopilot, Draal replied, "T-they made it up the steps, father … I'm sorry."

Kanjigar looked like he had been struck in the gut, "What? *How*?!"

Draal blinked a few times, still stuck in a state of disbelief. "I'm sorry, father. Seer Jim … He just seemed more important."

Kanjigar frowned at this and really looked down at the downtrodden teen. The boy was refusing to look him in the eye and kept wiping his sleeves over his eyes. Great, just what they needed. An upset Seer. The others probably left him when he couldn't get off the boundary band or maybe Young Jim told them to go. Jim seemed like the self-sacrificing sort.

A rumbling sound escaped the large troll's chest, something meant to comfort troll whelps. He then carefully put a hand on the teen's shoulder, "I'm sorry, Young Jim. I know that this all may seem like a punishment to you, but I hope you realize one day that … we keep you here to help protect you."

Jim's glare was ruined by his red-rimmed eyes. Kanjigar merely sighed at this and drew himself back up to his full height, the Trollhunter turning his head to watch Blinky and Aaarrrgghh run towards them.

Looking down at his son, Kanjigar frowned, "Draal … you seem shaken. Are you capable of watching Young Jim?"

Still in a slight state of shock, the spikey troll straightened his shoulders and floundered, "Y-yes father. I'm fine. I just …I'm just …"

Kanjigar's frown grew deeper and deeper, his eyes shifted over his son. Draal seemed to fold into himself like he wanted nothing more than to ball up and roll away from the situation. He used to do that as a whelp when he was upset … and why was he holding his right arm oddly as if shielding it?

"Are you sure you are fine?" asked Kanjigar carefully, worry prickling in the back of his mind

"Everything is fine," quickly said Draal, straightening up again, "I can … I can take Jim back to his dwell if you want father."

The older, blue troll didn't like the look in his son's eyes. Draal almost seemed … ashamed. Perhaps he was blaming himself for letting the other children go.

Figuring that he would speak with his heir about it later, Kanjigar waved for Aaarrrgghh and Blinky to follow him. The parade of trolls then ran up the crystal steps without much fanfare leaving Jim and Draal once again alone.

Jim was now struggling to keep in sniffles and Draal didn't know how to feel. Was he Angry? Ashamed? Was he really that bad of a candidate that the amulet chose a human whelp? Was he so unhonorable and weak-minded that he wasn't worth the mantel of Trollhunter?

His father would probably disown him if he knew how worthless he was.

A tightness formed in Draal's chest, a feeling he couldn't name, and he swallowed Jim's secret as if it was his own. His words were soft as he directed Jim back towards the city, "Do not worry, Jim... I will not tell. I will take that secret to the afterlife with me."

His honor depended on it.

Chapter End Notes

Mmm, angsty Draal. Almost as good as angsty Jim flavoring.

Children Dear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bular glared down from his perch under the Holland Transit Bridge. He had been following that fool Kanjigar through the forest, and then suddenly the Trollhunter had turned tail and ran in the other direction. There was seemingly no rhyme or reason to it. Had the blue troll caught his scent and retreated?

Beside himself, Bular lifted an arm up and sniffed his armpit.

No. He smelled like he usually did.

Maybe it was his breath?

The dark troll was about to blow into his hands and check his breath when suddenly the magical entrance to Troll Market cracked open, a pile of human whelps suddenly pouring out like a flood.

“We have to run," cried one of the whelps.

"Jim said you can never outrun a troll," yelled another.

“And they can still track our scents,” added a pudgy one. “Guys, old Can-head is so gonna catch us. We have to move and I don't know about you guys, but I want to remember where Jim's stuck.”

Bular raised a brow at this. Were the whelps talking about the Trollhunter, and why were they even down there? Humans were not supposed to be in Troll Market. Wait ... Did they have a *horngazel*?

Ohhh, he couldn’t be that lucky, could he?

“Should we split up?” asked a panicked male with golden locks.

Hmm, that one had a fair amount of muscle. He would make a fine meal. So would the chubby one. Though the muscly one would be more fun to chase. Then again, there were four girls here. Wait. No, that small one smelled like a male as well. Girls always were sweeter. Hmmm … choices, choices.

Chuckling to himself, all the teenagers suddenly stilled below him,

having heard his chortle.

Bular, having decided to play with his food, then ran his claws almost gleefully across the metal beams, causing a screech to echo across the canal. Immediately, six heads tilted up to look at him. Chuckling again to himself, the dark troll couldn't help but smell the fear as it started to permeate the air.

"*Children dear, children dear, came a cry from their mother*," mockingly sang Bular in his deep rumbling voice, remembering an old song sung by the humans of his long-left homeland. "*The woods are dark and deep my dears, so be mindful of one another. The trees are tall and the hollows bleak, things do go missing. A child here and village there, forgotten altogether. It might be nothing, it might be something, deep there in the dark. So be mindful, my children, and be oh-so-terrified of the dark."*

The children all looked properly petrified at this point and the stocky one even whined, "He can sing. Why can he sing?! I didn't sign up for this."

"He's probably a karaoke master," murmured the chubby one.

"Him being a baritone is the least of our troubles, guys," hissed the girl with clips in her hair.

Bular just laughed at this, finally leaping down before the teens, his weight seeming to shake the ground as he landed. All the children foundered backward into one another and back towards the portal they had just exited … which chose this most opportune moment to close.

"We're going to die," whined Eli as he pressed his back against the cool cement.

The black troll merely chuckled at the teenagers' fear, his deep voice almost a purr, "I haven't had children much in the last few decades. People always notice when the young go missing … at least presently. In the dark days, humans bore spares."

Mary and Darci shared a horrified glance as Mary mouthed 'spares' like it was a curse word.

"But I am feeling generous tonight," the troll added, his claws twitching. "The first to tell me why the Trollhunter is harboring humans and gives me the horngazel to Troll Market … gets to live."

Steve, the current holder of the crystal key, swallowed loudly when all the teenagers subtlety glanced at him. He knew he was kind of a coward, but only sometimes. He wasn't going to throw everyone under the bus. He knew he was brave enough to speak first at least, "We don't know anything, t-troll j-jerk."

Bular's red glare snapped to him sharply, the troll growling, "Then I'll just have to eat my way through you first, yes? The last will snitch when I start eating their legs I suppose."

And with that, the Gumm Gumm charged forward grabbing wildly at the group. He made it a point to snatch the blond that had mouthed off to him … and the one that smelled like trolls. The chubby one.

The other youths all scattered like field mice, the Gumm Gumm's hands now full of a struggling blond and the whining husky one. The dark troll chuckled to himself, breathing hot air onto the sniveling blond as the boy pounded his fist uselessly against Bular's stone arm.

"Let's see how brave you are after I start eating your limbs," purred Bular as he started to lift up the tallest boy. *Steve* was his name if the females' cries in the background were any indication. The loose teenagers even started throwing stones and trash at him as if to dissuade him, but the dark troll just lifted the blond up higher and higher until the boy was dangling over his mouth like a piece of meat.

The muscly boy was shouting now and kicking out at this point, he even landed one hit on Bular's nose. In retaliation, the troll quickly snapped at the teen's leg while squeezing the boy's ribs. The child barked in pain, but somehow, he saved his leg by tugging it away at the last second. The same couldn't be said for his shoe though, the item slurred up like spaghetti.

Humming, obviously amused with this game, Bular asked one last time, "Any last words? They may spare you?"

The teen named Steve was sniveling now, snot and tears dripping down his face, but it was one of the teenagers on the sidelines that spoke up, "The Trollhunter didn't invite anyone. We … we snuck into Troll Market."

Those piercing red eyes suddenly snapped in the thin boy's direction. Said teenager stumbled back, nearly tripping over his own feet, his glasses glinting in the dark.

"And what would you want in Troll Market, fleshbag?" asked Bular,

lowering Steve so that the larger boy was mere inches from the ground. The poor blond's hair was a mess, his face red and tear-stained. He was obviously having issues breathing as well.

Swallowing, looking at the girls, the lanky boy straightened his shoulders, "M-magic. We want to learn magic, and we thought we … could steal it from the trolls."

At that, Bular laughed, "Magic? For a skill-less fleshling like you? Hardly. You are no Pale Lady. The only thing you would be good for is a meal, and hardly that with how reedy you are."

Eli's face went pale at this, but he didn't back down, his eyes continuing to look at Steve and Toby. "Well, that's w-why we were stealing it. As for the horn-thing, I-I have it. So-so, if you want it. Y-your going to have to drop them and c-catch me."

Bular continued to stare, his uncanny red eyes boring into Eli's very soul. The teenager was all but shaking at this point, but he kept his ground, if only for his new friends. Steve was obviously in pain and Tobias looked like he had something up his sleeve. *Literally*.

Lip twitching, the black troll growled into the night, "Do you think me a fool, little pest? I will merely eat everyone here and chase you down last. Now, I will consume this one first and continue to devour your little pack-mates until I hear something satisfactory."

The wan boy stumbled as if physically struck, his voice catching when Steve was lifted back up, ready to be eaten. Toby, shouting, finally slipped out of his vest that Bular had ahold of, throwing something *alive* at the troll's face.

The son of Gunmar, in turn, shouted as a gnome attacked his face, dropping Steve like a stone as he barked, "*Why is it always the face*!" Steve, in turn, barely landed on his feet, gripping at his ribs as he wheezed. Toby actually had to help him stumble forward, the gaggle of teens all grabbing and pulling at the two boys along as they all started up the incline to the waterway.

Their head start was short-lived though when Chompsky suddenly went flying over all of their heads like a screaming little rocket. Toby gasped at this and struggled to pick up the disoriented gnome as all the teens rushed by, Steve being all but carried by a very determined Eli and Claire.

"Go, go, go, go!" cried Darci, pushing the back of the group as she

kept glancing backward. “I can hear him coming up the canal! We need to get somewhere with people!”

“It's nearly four in the morning! There are no people!” barked Mary in reply. “We need to split up.”

“Haven’t you ever seen a horror movie? We die if we split up,” barked Toby as he cradled Chompsky, hoping the little guy wasn’t hurt too bad. His horn … wasn’t attached anymore.

“But I don’t wanna die ugly,” wailed Mary, her mascara long since smeared. She might have been ready to say more, but instead, a full-fledged scream escaped her as red eyes peeked over the waterway's incline.

Bular’s following chuckle seemed to vibrate through all of their bones as the great beast calmly made his way towards the group, a new rhythm on his lips, “*The children were quiet, quiet as mice. They did not stir or wince or whine*.”

“This isn't a bloody poetry slam,” growled Claire, nearly tripping as Steve stumbled into her slightly.

“Their parents were missing, you see. Nowhere to be seen. A woeful predicament indeed.”

“Please, don’t leave me,” was all Steve could say, wincing as his ribs were jostled.

“The smallest was the first to go, she seemed to fall right into a hole. The eldest was next, his bones did not flex, and a snap, snap, snap followed after.”

“We won’t leave you! Promise,” added Eli, fumbling with his pack for a second.

“The eldest daughter, oh how she did wail. She was long gone and gulleted before she could inhale.”

Eli, finally finding what he wanted, pulled out a red flare with a cry, “I found it! And mom thought Ranger Scouts taught me nothing.”

“The middle child was next. Oh, how he did run. He raced and he stumbled and blubbered about.”

Pepperjack struggled to activate it, all the teens stumbling back as it

finally took flame.

“The neighbors came to see what was all the matter. Oh, how I was pleased, so many more for my platter.”

Then, somehow not dropping it, Eli flung the flare. And it went flying and flying and … ended up way too short. It was yards from Bular.

“You should have let me throw it buttsnack,” ground out Steve, wincing at the mere thought of moving his arms.

Bular, meanwhile, stalled for a moment as if confused by the red flare blazing harmlessly between them on the ground. Then, suddenly, he laughed like it was all a great joke, “Was that supposed to hurt me, whelp?”

Swallowing, the thin teen's hands shook, but still, he spoke, “No … that’s not what flares are used for.”

Then, as if Eli knew he would be driving over the Transit bridge at this very moment, a flash of red and blue lights colored the world around them, the woot-woot of a police siren filling the air. The kids all jumped, except for Eli. Bular himself, cracked his neck to quickly look upward onto the bridge, eyes widening in surprise.

There was a police cruiser on the bridge.

“Run!” screamed Eli, the boy racing up the grassy incline and onto the road. All the other teenagers fumbled into action as well, Steve and Toby all but dragged up the ascent, the dew-covered grass causing most of them to slip in their rush.

…

Sargent Ben Gulager drove over the Holland Transit Bridge at least four times a night. It was a habit really, part of his routine, especially since he got a sinking feeling around the place. Call it a sixth sense if you will, like a rock in his gut, but he always made a point of it. Even tonight … even though he felt it was a useless endeavor. James Lake Jr. and Tobias Domzalski had been missing for more than two days. After the first forty-eight hours, you were usually looking for a b-

He didn’t want to finish that thought, especially since he had seen young James a few days ago, pale and afraid as his mother raved about hitting a monster with her car.

Poor Barbara Lake. Nothing crueler could happen to a mother.

Release a long breath, Ben reached for his coffee only to nearly slam on his breaks when a flare of red lit up the right side of the bridge. Even though he couldn't see it directly because of the bridge's railing, he knew the angry, trembling flash of a flare anywhere.

"What the –"

He didn't even get to finish that thought when suddenly a body stumbled up onto the asphalt at the bridge's end, followed by another and another. He could bearly make out what was going on until the forms started running towards his car, the headlight illuminating the situation. Teenagers. And they looked terrified. In fact, one of them was basically being dragged by two others.

This was not good. Were those idiot kids messing around in the canal? Stupid, little fools.

Putting the car into park just in time for a kid with glasses to slam into the hood, Ben had to blink once or twice. He recognized the straggly teen. That was Mrs. Pepperjack's boy, Eli. And was that the Council Woman's Nunez's daughter? What was she doing out here after what nearly happened to her brother?! And that was Detective Louis Scotts' little girl! Was that the football player, Palchuk? Why was the blond being basically dragged? Was he injured? And … and was that Tobias Domzalski?

What was going on?!

Getting out of his car, Ben barked at the kids, "Sam hill, k-k-kids. What the b-bloody h-"

"A man-eating monster is coming! We need to leave!" cried Eli as he scrambled to the back door, opening it just in time to have Palchuk basically thrown into the backseat, Tobias and the Nunez girl piling in after him. Eli barely fell in before slamming the door shut. The two other girls scrambled into the front passenger's side, buckling in together like two sardines.

For a moment the officer just stood there, confusion knitting his brow together. Nonetheless, his hand slid down to his sidearm and he turned his head to glance at the edge of the bridge. The whole area seemed oddly still in the shifting red light of the flare. There was nothing there.

He turned to glance back at the petrified teenagers in the car. Before he could even open his mouth, all of them started screaming and pointing, the whole car shaking on its shocks from their movement. Ben's head snapped back toward the end of the bridge and for a moment … nothing seemed out of place. Until he saw it … a dark spot in the backfill … like a boulder had rolled into the middle of the road, just out of reach of his headlights.

Beside himself, Ben unclipped his service weapon and started walking towards the boulder shape. The kids were all shouting now but for a different reason. They were begging for him to come back and to just *leave. It wasn't safe.*

Stalling, Ben turned and glanced at the kids, calling back, "S-stay in the c-car. I will b-be right b-back."

Taking a few more steps Ben felt a chill run down his spine right before a chuckle echoed over the expanse before him. It was a deep sound, like the roar of the river beating against a dam. And then the dark mass spoke, two sets of red eyes opening and glowing there in the dark, "*Haha. The neighbors did come to see what was the matter … Oh, how I was pleased, so many more for my platter."*

And then the boulder was rushing toward him, heavy steps seeming to shake the bridge like a charging rhino. Gulager felt his lungs catching, fear drowning his mind, but his officers' training took over and he pulled his service weapon up. Without a second thought, he started to shoot toward the center mass.

He wasn't sure how many bullets he fired, how many empty casings clinked uselessly to the blacktop below his feet, but the thing in the dark didn't stall its charge until finally, he aimed towards the head, firing off his last two shots.

The creature barked, probably in surprise more than pain, because it was now close enough for Ben to see in the headlights … It was made of rock. It was a stone monster that would tower over any human being. And what sharp claws it had … and so, so, many teeth.

Stumbling backward, Ben barely made it to the driver's seat when suddenly the beast was towering before the headlights, sneering down at the car and all its inhabitants. Gulager immediately slammed the car into reverse, the powerful engine roaring and lurching … only to be held in place.

The beast had latched onto the cattle guard on the front of the vehicle,

and thus the front bumper.

The creature was laughing now, seemingly loving this game. The children were screaming in the background. The car's engine was roaring while the rear end fishtailed uselessly, the car door swinging wildly because Ben hadn't closed it yet.

This was a *nightmare*.

He always knew there was something lurking in the dark of Arcadia Oaks. Likely, that was where all the homeless and missing hikers went. It was probably where all the children disappeared during the Milk Carton Epidemic as well.

Suddenly, Ben was angry. The blood pounding in his ears wasn't from terror but *rage*. This thing could not have these teens. It would not have any other kids!

Turning a quick glance at Scotts' girl, part of him knowing that the man would have taught her proper gun handling, he growled, "Scotts' girl, Darci, I need you to hand me the shotgun. Make sure the safety's off and it's loaded. I'm probably going to only get one shot."

The girl's eyes were so wide, but she reached for the gun between the two front seats without a second thought. Her hands shook, but she made sure it was loaded … and when she released the safety, the sound seemed to echo throughout the car.

"Hold the steering wheel," was all the aging officer could bark as he took the shotgun in both hands and aimed for the windshield. He fired with a steely glint in his eyes, the glass exploding outward with flickering traces of blue and red lights. The dark beast barked in surprise, turning his head to likely keep the glass out of his eyes, releasing the car accidently.

Gulager would have kept shooting, but the car was now careening backward and towards the cement railing on the bridge. He instantly gripped the steering wheel, the car squealing as it flew in reverse across the bridge, leaving burnt rubber and reflective glass shards in its wake.

Bular, wiping the glass from his eyes, growled lowly, disappointed. Huffing in irritation, he headed into the darkness as he murmured to no one but the night, "Meals always taste better when they have to be chased anyway."

And then he was gone, unaware that the Trollhunter had just exited Troll Market, hunting the same prey as he was.

…

At some point, Gulager had stopped driving backward like a madman. Taillights were not made for illuminating the road. And now, he was sitting at a stoplight, all four ways empty except for his mangled car that was now making strange knocking noises from the engine. The poor vehicle looked trashed, the cattle guard in the front was bent oddly and the windshield had a huge hole in it, the cool night air kissing the cheeks of all the inhabitants inside.

No one dared say a word as they continued to sit under that red light, seemingly waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Slowly releasing the breath he had seemed to be holding since they escaped the bridge, the officer loosened his white-knuckled grasp on the steering wheel and put the car into park. They all sat there a moment more, the light turning green before the man dared speak.

“Are any of you k-kids hurt?” was the first thing the man asked, his head turning toward the back seat.

“I think it cracked a rib or something on Steve,” said Claire carefully as the blonde breathed through his teeth in the backseat.

“Otherwise, we’re fine,” continued Darci, even though there was a cut on her cheek from the flying glass. “Just some scrapes and bruises. Steve … got the worse of it.”

“And Chompsky,” added Tobias showing an odd little ‘man’ to the officer. “But I think he’s going to be fine.”

Gulager sucked in a breath as he eyeballed the odd creature in the backseat and then released it slowly like a deflating tire, “I-I always knew t-there was some-something there in the d-dark of Arcadia Oaks, in the forests a-and in the sewers.”

The silence hung there for a moment more, pungent and almost choking. None of the teens dared to speak. After the officer allowed one more dragged out exhale to escape him, did he speak, “W-what was that t-thing?”

“A troll,” said Tobias, the boy tucking the little stone man away. “Bular, son of Gunmar. He was planning on eating us before you came

along."

Ben's hands tightened on the steering wheel for a second before he carefully nodded, "A-and what do a-all of you have to do w-with a troll?"

Eli was the one to speak this time, leaning forward in the seat, "Well … it all started for us, the Creepslayerz, when I saw two cosplays riding by on a bike."

…

"Well, this looks homey, ja," said Otto Scaarbach sardonically, his German accent feeling out of place in a temple in the middle of a jungle. "The skulls give such a lovely accent to the stonework. Just lovely."

Strickler gave the shorter changeling an ill amused glance, pulling a large ring from his pocket at the same time as he placed it almost cautiously onto his finger. "Your cowardice is showing, Otto. If you didn't have the backbone for this, why did you even come?"

"Well, I wanted to get an accurate account of how you die … for prosperity sake," said the stout changeling as he continued to linger behind the taller man, almost unwilling to take a step further inside.

Walter's eyes became slits as he glared at his counterpart, his lip twitching, "You are part of that pool at headquarters, aren't you? The one betting how I am going to expire?"

Otto didn't even deny it, he merely chuckled, "You know how it goes. It's nice to have a little extra spending money."

Sighing, pinching his nose bridge, Strickler grumbled, "Let it be known that if I die here, you'll probably be *expiring* as well Otto. The assassin does not leave survivors."

The other man winced, now trailing behind Walt. "Are you sure about this? What if he doesn't listen to you?"

Lifting his hand up with the ring on it, a trail of yellow light seeming to linger after, Walter stated, "He won't have much choice."

With that said, the two changelings and their goblin guide finally stepped into the main chamber of the ruins, two chains hanging down into a pile of rubble. Neither missed the stone hands that were

peaking out of said rubble.

“D-do you think he’s dead?” asked Otto, his whispered voice seeming to echo around the chamber.

“I hope not. Otherwise, we came a long way for nothing,” grumbled Walter as he reached for a release switch on the wall. Immediately, the chains went slack, clausing everyone to jump at the sudden noise, but still ... nothing happened.

Not knowing what else to do, Walter shooed the goblin forward. Said goblin looked insulted for a moment, but when Strickler pointed him toward the pile of rubble again, he relented.

Said goblin was weary, as he should be. He first sniffed around the rubble. He then poked at one of the stones, and then oh-so-carefully he touched one of the still hands under the rubble ... causing everyone to scream when the staff at the back of the pile fell over instead of a hand twitching.

Hand on his chest, likely having suffered a minor heart attack, Strickler sighed. He then pinched his nose-bridge while baring all his teeth, “All that time *wasted*!”

“It wasn’t wasted,” tried to sooth Otto, giving the goblin a bewildered glance as the green bean started dancing on the grave of Angor Rot, rubble trickling away as the creature continued to bop about. The little monster was probably celebrating his brush with death.

“You don’t understand! Bular grows more and more irrational every day,” ground out the changeling, eyes flashing in Otto’s direction. “His fixation over some mystery hooded boy drags him above ground more and more often. He’s going to reveal us to all of Arcadia at this rate, and we’ll have to clean it up. Do you really want to have to *cleanse* the whole town?! And don’t get me started on the captured bridge piece. Bular has been in a deadlock with the Trollhunter for decades. We need a winning card here Otto, or it's us changelings that will have to pay the price.”

Otto shifted uncomfortably, his voice picking up a tone of warning, “You should choose your words carefully, *mein freund*. There are many ears and eyes in the Janus Order. If just anyone heard you speak that way, it could -”

Strickler scoffed at his compatriot, “There are no *friends* in the Janus Order, Scaarbach. We are tools to –“

“Eck!”

Suddenly, both changelings stalled mid-argument, a loud squeak causing the two men to turn their heads toward the rubble pile … which really wasn’t *just* a pile of stones anymore. An arm had popped out of the ruins like a daisy, the hand slowly wringing the neck of the goblin. The green creature was thrashing about, its face turning colors. And, before either of the halflings could think to turn away, the little beast *popped*, splattering both of the men with gooey innards.

Otto immediately gasped and stumbled backward as he cried, “Angor Rot, he lives!”

Stickler was left standing there, as if he was too afraid to move, the tall form of the assassin rising out of the rubble. A chuckle echoed over the dim ruins.

“What noisy house guests I have,” ground out Angor Rot darkly as he rose to his full height, the ancient troll merely shrugging off the chains that bound his wrists. “It seems you know my name. It’s a shame I will never know yours.”

With that, Angor Rot called his staff to his hand like it was demented boomerang, and then he charged forward ready to slay Strickler as if he was little more than a pest. Yet, right when the legend was about to land a killing blow, Strickler lifted his hands up to protect his face … an eerie yellow glow stalling Angor Rot where he stood.

The assassin seemed to be in shock at first, the words falling from his lips, “A piece of myself.”

Strickler, seemingly discovering he was both alive and in one piece, straightened up and turned the ring towards himself. He stared at the stone's yellow glow and then smirked, turning the ring to the assassin, “Yes, it's in the Inferna Copula … and your services are required.”

Chapter End Notes

Bular really does like to play with his food. And yaaaay! Angor’s finally in the house. I love him so much. He’s my favorite antagonist in the series … the poor, poor bastard. >:D

Pawn of a Puppet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Is the village on fire?” asked Angor Rot as he stared down at Arcadia Oaks.

Otto and Walt were too busy stumbling out of the troll’s portal to give the assassin’s question much mind. Going through a portal from that far was … unsettling at best. Strickler barely managed to stumble over to a nearby tree before he threw up and Otto just leaned over where he stood and emptied his stomach.

The troll ignored them both as he continued to ponder what as before him, his yellow eyes shifting back and forth as the lights from the city below reflected slightly off the crystalline nature of his troll skin.

“W-we should have taken the plane back,” finally ground out Otto as he wiped his mouth, looking entirely miserable.

Strickler, having recovered slightly, spat once to get the taste of bile out of his mouth before he got a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his mouth. Then, he stood up straight and smoothed back his hair. Now collected, he answered Otto, “It would have taken days to get him through customs. Bular would have started a mass panic by then if we waited.

Otto frowned at that, but barely got his mouth open when his cell phone started ringing. He wiped his mouth again and then miserably answered the cell phone, “Hallo, this is Scaarbach.”

Walter, in turn, walked over to the troll, his arms folding behind his back as he observed the town below. The sound of nightly insects and Otto’s mumbling could be heard in the background before the changeling finally spoke, “It is called electricity. The world has changed much since you last wandered its surface, Angor Rot. It is immensely more complicated, which is why I have awakened you. I have a task for you.”

The troll’s hand tightened momentarily, but he didn’t pull his gaze from the valley below, his voice echoing like ground gravel when he finally spoke, “I find the world changes a lot less than everyone likes to think. The beasts are always hungry, and the prey forever cowers.”

Strickler raised a brow at this and moved his hands to the front of his chest so that his fingers were pressed together. "… Of course. Nonetheless, I have a little problem I need you to deal with before the entire town is thrown into mass hysteria. We don't need another incident like Centralia on our hands. That was Bular's blunder as well, and last I checked, those fires are still burning."

Angor Rot's hand tightened so quickly on the Skathe-Hrün that a normal staff would have snapped in two. Instead, the weapon groaned and whined under the stress. Walter, unwittingly, took a half-step back as if expected to be struck. Immediately, as if he smelled weakness, the assassin crowded the changeling's space, his voice filled with rage as his yellow eyes blazed, "I will *not* be a tool to that wretched fool, Bular! I am the Pale Lady's assassin! I have taken the heads of countless Trollhunters and nearly Merlin himself. I will not serve that puppet! And I will certainly not serve the pawn of a puppet."

Despite the glow of the Inferna Copula, Angor Rot seem to keep crowding Strickler until the man's hand was the only thing between them, the taller troll's hot breath running over Strickler's hair and face.

And for a second, that was how they stood, barely a hairs breath apart until the changeling dared open his eyes. Slowly, he swallowed as the troll continued to glare down at him while panting with rage, but slowly the halfling turned his hand so that the ring was once again revealed to the troll. This was his chain.

Yellow light playing over Angor Rot's face, the troll stepped back with a snort. Walt, straightening back up, fixed his jacket and cleared his throat as he added, "Like you said, the world has barely changed. Everyone is always the pawn of someone else, and you are mine. You're but a dog on a leash."

Angor Rot said nothing to this. He was silent. Though his gaze could melt metal.

Nonetheless, Strickler continued, "As for Bular, I would prefer that you *abstain* from interacting with him at all. In fact, I'd prefer if he doesn't even know you are here. I just want you to do your job and if you do it well … you can have the ring."

The hungry look in Angor Rot's eyes was unmistakable so Strickler continued.

“I’m going to be forward with you, the Trollhunter got ahold of a piece of Killahead Bridge. I need you to retrieve it from him. It’s likely hidden in Troll Market knowing that stalwart fool,” added Strickler simply as he folded his arms over his chest.

The rangy troll had taken this time to lean against one of the trees almost lazily, his arms crossed over his chest while a pleased grin crossed his face. He even chuckled dryly before he commented, "You’ve lost one your toys, have you? Bular really should keep a closer eye on his things.”

Walter said nothing at first, shifting on his feet before he added in the softer tone so Otto wouldn’t overhear, “Nonetheless, if you get into Troll Market, I have a second task for you. There was a human boy, two actually, that the Trollhunter liberated from Bular and then *kept*. He has had them for days and that is quite unlike him to keep any humans. Find out why.”

Quizzically rising a stone brow at the question, the assassin pushed away from the tree, “And the Trollhunter?”

“Kill him for all I care,” groused Strickler. “Just make sure that bridge piece is obtained first.”

The troll opened his mouth as if to say something more when Otto stumbled over towards them, the short changeling pale and sweaty, “We have a problem. The Janus Order has been trying to get ahold of us. Bular was *seen* by a police officer while he was trying to eat a group of children he found under the Holland Transit Bridge.”

Walter's mouth dropped at this and Angor Rot immediately guffawed like this was all a good joke. Then, probably to ignore being the changelings’ personal cab, he waved the shadow staff to create a new portal, his words almost a parting purr, “And here I thought nothing about this task would be amusing. I’ll leave you to it then, *pawns*.”

And then, like that, he was gone, off to fulfill his tasks presumably.

Strickler could only cover his face with a hand and groan at the humanity of it all. Otto, cell phone still awkwardly in hand, could only ask, “Should I call us a car then?”

…

“I-I’m not lying on a p-police report b-because of s-some c-creatures called c-changelings,” repeated Sargent Ben Gulager as he took off his

hat and sat in the waiting seat next to Tobias. Steve had already been admitted and the other kids had been shuffled to the waiting room, presumably for questioning. Toby said the trolls had been feeding him, but since he had been officially missing, the doctors still wanted to check him out.

And poor James Lake Jr was still with the *good* trolls, apparently.

“They will kill you and like steal your skin or something. Jim didn’t really get into the specifics,” argued Toby from his seat on the exam table, the boy dropping his voice when someone walked by outside of the curtained area. “I just know that changelings make people disappear, Mr. Gulager. For our safety and yours, we must keep this to ourselves right now otherwise everyone will think we're crazy town banana pants before we conveniently end up missing.”

Gulager wiped a hand down his face and then pinned a glare to the stocky boy, “And what of your f-friend, James? What d-do you want me to t-tell his mother?”

Tobias twitched, sitting back, “I was going to tell her the truth, I guess, but no one else can know.”

“A-and even if Mrs. L-Lake believes you, what of the news p-papers? T-the volunteers? P-people will n-notice that J-James is still missing,” added the Sargent, frowning.

For a moment, the teen was silent in thought before he sighed, “I don’t know. Just give me a few hours to think of something. Jim’s safety depends on the changelings not knowing what he is.”

Ben raised a brow, about to ask what Jim *was* because the teen's story was a botched job at best, when the curtain was pulled to the side. A teary-eyed Nana and a stressed-looking Barbara Lake lurched toward the teenager in the bed. The older woman immediately suffocated Toby in a hug and Barbara fluttered next to her … asking about Jim.

Despite the heartwarming reunion, Gulager’s gaze was only on the strange tall man in a black suit behind both of them. He immediately didn’t like the lean figure. Said individual had almost foxlike qualities with his sharp nose, triangle-cheeks, and perfectly combed red hair. His gaze was also sharp, almost predatory as he observed all of them.

“Oh, Toby-Pie, I’m so glad you are safe. I was so worried. I thought I was going … to be alone again,” sobbed the aging woman, her arms tightening around the teenager as he struggled to return her

suffocating hug.

At this point, Toby couldn't help but noticed that Mrs. Lake was staring at the two of them, her fingers wringing together. He knew what she was waiting to ask, waiting for the hug to end, and he didn't know what to say. His mind was blanking. He hadn't been given enough time to come up with a sufficient lie. In fact, he sucked at lying in general. He had never played poker but instinctively knew he'd suck at it. He just didn't have to lie very often. He wasn't a bad boy (even though he knew the ladies loved things like that). And right now, Barbara was giving him this begging look and he just couldn't think fast enough!

"Toby … where's Jim?" finally whispered Mrs. Lake, tears already falling down her cheeks like she expected the worst.

Toby, overcome, blurted out the first thing he could think of while Gulager almost facepalmed in the background, "Monsters kidnapped us for dressing up as cosplayers. They still have Jim."

Immediately, Barbara placed a hand over her mouth as she shook her head, "No. No. No. It's the same thing. The *same thing* happened to Uncle Jack. He said monsters took his little brother Jim and ... then never found him. I ... need to leave."

And then, unable to stand there a second longer, she stumbled away sobbing.

The sergeant gave the teenager a look that said, '*Really*?'

Toby cringed and mouthed, '*Sorry, I panicked bro*.'

At least that was what Ben though the kid mouthed. Then again, he might have been gasping for air with the way his grandmother was crushing him. Either way, he followed the sobbing down the hall … or at least he tried to.

Before he could think of how to present the truth without terrifying the woman, the fox faced man in the suit cut him off, flashing his FBI badge. His name was Roy Rockhold and immediately, Gulager felt his stomach sink.

The agent called Tobias hysterical, and that trauma was likely to blame for this monster explanation. As for the other kids, Rockhold was already labeling it as mass hysteria caused by Tobias' ramblings. It enraged Ben, honestly. Here were these stupid-brave kids fighting

monsters in the dark, trying to save their friend, and this man was calling them all *hysterical*. So, he told him he had some video from the dashcam in the car.

He wanted to show this smug man. He wanted to put him in his place. He wanted to prove he finally had answers for all those missing kids in the Milk Carton Epidemic. What he got to his car … there was only static on his dashcam.

The horror must have shown on his face, because Rockhold raised a brow, his smile piteous like he was talking to a senile old man, "Wait. Don't tell me you believed those kids? That you think that there are monsters in Arcadia Oaks as well, Mr. Gulager? I mean, I understand … with that head wound … mistakes can be made, right?"

It was then and there that Ben realized what was happening. Why this man's smile reminded him of a shark and why his eyes were like a fox's. He might have looked like a man, but Roy Rockhold was not a man.

He had to be a changeling.

And Gulager was already on their radar … and if he wasn't careful. He might end up dead.

…

Draal found himself continually turning his head toward Jim as they walked him back to Vendel's dwell. His shoulders were stiff, his back was ridged, and his mind was swimming as it repeated the human's words, *'I was the Trollhunter after your father.'*

Skinny legged *Jim* had been the next Trollhunter and Draal … had not.

He still felt kind of sick about the whole conversation they had had earlier this evening, and by the look on the human's face, so was the seer. Neither of them said a thing the whole way across Troll Market until they finally got to the main chamber of Elder Vendel's dwell. A town guard had already rushed off to find the old goat and inform him that Seer Jim had been found.

So, now, they awkwardly stood there waiting, the warm light of the Heartstone raining down on them. Draal kept shift from leg to leg while rubbing his right arm. Jim, in turn, was staring at this one bookshelf like the titles held there were the most interesting things in

the world. He even picked up one and pretended to page through it.

Finally, the blue troll sighed and broke the silence. He had a thousand questions but one rose to the top. “Why did the amulet choose you? I trained my whole life to become the next Trollhunter, to honor my father and family line, and it chooses you? Why? Why wasn’t I good enough that it would pick a mere human whelp over me?”

Jim closed his eyes and sighed. He stood there a moment more as if feeling the warmth of the Heartstone before he opened his blue orbs and gave Draal a sad look, “Don’t you think I’ve asked that as well? I was not equipped for that responsibility, Draal. I was just some dumb high school kid that liked cooking and Gun Robot. I nearly died so many times that it kind of became a running joke. In fact, one of those near-death experiences came at your hands.”

Draal winced at this and rubbed his arm again. He tried to think of what to say to that without insulting the seer, but Jim then added in a warmer tone, “But you were also the one that taught me how to properly hold a sword.”

Stalling, eyes widening, the troll gaped, “I taught the Trollhunter how to use his blade?”

Nodding, smile sad but still there, Jim continued, “You were my friend in that life, Draal. In fact, when you got banished from Troll Market, you lived in my basement for a while. You were a source of advice and protection for my household.”

And … that warm feeling was instantly gone.

Draal felt his throat constrict as he choked, “I got *banished*? From Troll Market? Why?!”

It was Jim’s turn to wince, but the boy quickly waved it off like it was water under the bridge, quickly adding, “It was only for a little bit. You quickly proved yourself honorable and were unbanished.”

“*Unbanished*? Why did I have to prove my honor to begin with? Wait … will this happen again?” asked Draal almost desperately as his mind started a horrible scenario where his father exiled him personally, “If my father finds out I was banished in the future, he will send me away to keep our family’s honor intact. I … I do not wish to be sent away.”

Shaking his head now, Jim came forward and put a calming hand on

Draal's forearm before the blue troll worked himself into a tizzy. Draal didn't know if it was on purpose or just a small case of accidental magic, but immediately he felt calming magic race across the surface of his stone skin.

"It won't happen again. I'll make sure of it," replied Jim with a lopsided grin. "Just know that it all was a misunderstanding and that I would have never lasted as long as Trollhunter if you weren't there helping me along. So, you might not have been *the* Trollhunter, but you were one of my *trollhunters*. I valued your opinion and skills, and I always will."

The spiky troll allowed the warm pulse of magic to continue to lull him, his skin feeling tingly. It was weird and strangely calmly like pressing oneself against the Heartstone. So, he had been friends with a fleshbag? Not that there was anything wrong with that, he supposed. Jim obviously valued his thoughts and strength in the future. Such words of praise … he hungrily wanted to accept them, but for some reason, that seemed *wrong*.

He hadn't earned that praise … *Yet*.

Seer Jim did know the future. Draal had become a strong ally to the Trollhunter then. It was only safe to presume that he would do the same for his own father. He was glad to know that much. His hearts felt so fulfilled especially if his future was filled with his father's praises, but that also brought to question … what was going to happen to his arm? That day at the waterfall now hung over his head like an ill omen.

Looking at his right arm, the one the magic-user was still touching, Draal felt like this was his only opportunity to ask since Jim was being so forthcoming about the future.

"And … what of my arm? You mentioned something about it at the waterfall. Is that destined to happen as well?" asked Draal carefully, noticing how Jim's eyes widened in horror.

So yes, he was right. Sweet grumbly gruesome. No wonder he wasn't chosen to be the next Trollhunter. It was of little surprise if he was ill-equipped for the physical burden. Thus, he was fitted to be a mere advisor. It only made sense … for a cripple.

"Draal," stumbled Jim. "Its … it's not that bad. Ugh, I mean yes you … I mean no. Well, you got this cool robot arm thing and it was … kind of awesome actually."

Draal took a moment to look insulted, “Kind of awesome? How is losing my arm kind of awesome?!”

Jim grimaced and stepped back, waving his arms up at the taller being as if trying to calm him. “That came out wrong. What I mean to say is that it's not important. It’s not going to happen this time around. So, stop worrying about it. It’s never going to happen.”

Jim might have continued to stumble over his words, Draal’s upset becoming more and more tangible, if an old angry tone didn’t suddenly echo over the dwell along with the click of a Heartstone staff.

“Thank Deya’s light! I was worried that the Seer’s curse had come to claim you, Young Jim,” groused Vendel as he entered the dwell, quickly poking and prodding Jim for wounds as if the boy was made of glass. “I still can’t believe that you’ve lasted this long.”

Jim took a moment to look insulted, quickly adding, “I already told you Vendel, I’m not going to get myself killed. I’m not stupid.”

“And yet you got kidnapped this evening,” interrupted the aging troll, obviously irritated with the night’s events. He might have even started a tangent about humans getting into Troll Market if he didn’t suddenly stall and step towards Draal, a frown dragging at his lips.

“Draal,” started the healer. “Are you injured? I can’t help but notice how you are cradling your right arm towards your chest. Did the intruders do this to you?”

The Trollhunter’s son immediately flinched away from the older troll's hands, “I … it is nothing. It’s fine. I was just about to leave actually.”

“I will be the judge of that. I don't need Kanjigar badgering me when he comes back. Now, come into the healing dwell. I will have a quick look and if worse comes to worst, Jim can practice on you with his magic,” stated the pale troll, pointing the slightly reluctant troll towards a stone slab. Draal took a moment to look horrified, but was pushed forward while the pale troll turned back to the human.

Honestly, Vendel was surprised that the human child was so collected. He expected screaming and yelling and maybe some kind of magical outburst when he came back to his dwell. He didn't expect to see Jim using some kind of calming magic on an obviously upset Draal. Then again, it could just be a delayed reaction from the boy. And, call him petty, but nothing distracted an upset mind faster than a few

exhausting magic lessons, “Come along Jim. I know it’s been a harrowing evening, but you and I have a few things to do before you rest.”

Normally, Jim would have followed, but he found his feet planted there, his voice suddenly bitter, “What? Are we not going to talk about said harrowing adventure, Vendel? I think its fairly obvious that I was part of the reason the other humans were down here. In fact, those other humans came to rescue me.”

Vendel leaned on his staff, sighing. And there it was ... the outburst. It was bound to happen he supposed, and honestly, he wasn't surprised at all that the other whelps had come for Jim. Humans were social creatures after all. The real mystery was how they got access to Troll Market.

“I have come to that conclusion, yes,” said Vendel simply.

Jim’s eyes became hard, “And may I ask why I couldn’t just be allowed to leave with them? I need to finish high school. I need to tell my mom I am *alright*. I need the sun, Vendel.”

The pale goat stood there a moment, shaking his head. He quickly waved for Draal to go ahead and then took a few steps forward, towering over the human whelp.

Draal at least gave Jim a sympathetic glance before he did as he was told … leaving the two figures semi-alone. Vendel allowed the silence to hang for a minute more before replied in a gruff tone, “Seer Jim, I thought we already discussed this. Seers are in constant danger and have short life expectancies if they are not protected. So, you may leave when Kanjigar proclaims its safe for you to go above ground, or when you have learned enough magic to protect yourself. I am sorry if this entire debacle is distressing for you. It is troubling for all of us. But why can you not see the danger you are in? Bular knows of your existence and was actively hunting you. And where he roams changelings follow after. That isn’t even mentioning whatever tried to get into your dreamscape last night. I know you wish to return to your mother, which is normal for any whelp, but now is not the time. It is not safe for you above ground away from the Heartstone’s light. Troll Market is the best place for you right now. Tell me you understand.”

Vendel’s voice was ringing over the dwell by the time he was done, his words seemingly absolute.

Jim seemed to sag at the end, the rage disappearing from his eyes. In

fact, when he finally met the elder's milky eyes, he looked tired, "I … understand."

Sighing, the old goat seemed to deflate as well, "Good, now come along. We will check Draal for wounds and then I need to teach you a quick lesson in runes before you are allowed to sleep today. And, if you would please be forthcoming, I'd also like to know how those human whelps got into Troll Market? If you will even tell?"

The teenager acted oblivious about the Creepslayerz (not that Vendel was surprised), but while the old healer tromped ahead … he failed to notice that one of the books from his shelf was missing. The shelf where the pale elder kept his references on dark magic.

Chapter End Notes

> You know, they never really got into how deeply the Janus Order had its claws into the world, but given Otto's existence, I'm going to say that Nazis were once involved. Nonetheless, Ben probably has a target painted on his back. And Jim, my poor baby Jim, what are you up to? Also, I love Angor Rot, but he's so hard to write. Uggghhh!

Sentinel's Array

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What were you thinking? Attacking a police cruiser? Those things have cameras on them! We barely got away with the Centralia incident when you decided to galivant through there in the sixties. People luckily fell for the ruse and still think it was some freak underground fire. Unfortunately for you, Arcadia Oaks doesn't have any coal mines, Bular," almost shouted Strickler as he looked up at the towering black troll, the halfling so angry he was almost huffing.

Bular currently had his arms crossed over his chest and was standing there, looking ill amused. He had already threatened to eat Stricklander once this evening, but that hadn't worked like it usually did. In fact, this little argument was about an hour or two later than it should have been. The other impures were all running around trying to fix the issue but Stricklander was very *obviously* absent.

The dark troll couldn't help but tilt his head and show off one of his fangs as he groused, "I almost had that old fool-cop. He's been dogging my nightly routes since I got to this hovel of a human settlement. He needed to be eaten before he got too tough."

The changeling actually rolled his eyes, but Bular continued with a threatening growl as he leaned in, "As for the children, they had a horngazel. I wasn't just trying to fill my gullet this evening. So, unlike you, I at least was trying to get the bridge piece back. So where were you tonight, impure? I couldn't help but notice you were oddly absent."

At this, Strickler's eyes widened as if he had been caught in a lie. He even backed down slightly, a finger coming up and loosening his collar.

"Well, you see, I was away on business," tried to quickly defend Walter, more than aware that the black troll had started to lean in, his teeth slowly being bared like an attack dog.

"Business! What business is more important than freeing my father?!" barked Bular into the changeling's face, causing Strickler to wince as spittle rained over him.

One eye still half-closed and squinting, Strickler reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe off his face.

“I’ll have you know,” said Strickler as he stepped in closer, his back straightening and his spirit returning. “I was trying to find a resolution as well. You just got lucky lurking about.”

The shouting might have continued or escalated if a terrified masked changeling didn’t suddenly stumble into the room. “S-sorry to interrupt, but Rockholder has returned.”

The two powerful figures threw glowing glares at the interloper and the poor changeling audibly swallowed.

Stuffing his hanky back into his vest pocket with a snap of his wrist, Strickler hissed, “I think we are done with this discussion. I have a mess to clean up,” and with that he folded his hands behind his back and walked out of the room.

Bular’s lip twitched as he watched the changeling depart, a low growl escaping him as he stood alone in the room at headquarters. He didn’t know what got into Strickler tonight, but he didn’t like it. The impure was acting as if he could win in a fight … or at least had a heavy hitter in his corner.

Eyes still glowing in the dim room, Bular tromped off to find a snack … and if he found some answers about Strickler’s odd behavior at the same time, he would just count that as dessert.

…

Walking a few rooms over, Strickler stepped into a meeting room with a little coffee counter and a changeling that looked entirely too proud of himself. Roy Rockhold was all red hair and freckles, his long legs currently on top of the small table in the room as he leaned precariously in his chair. He even had the audacity to smile wickedly over his sunglass, a sucker in his mouth like a child.

It was not a secret amongst there kind, but Stricklander loathed Rockholder and his cheeky attitude. Rocklander was one of the few changelings raised in the Americas before the Fetch was originally lost, and it showed. Some might even call it pride on Roy’s part, but Strickler called it stupidity.

All changelings claimed that the household in which they were raised as *human children* didn’t affect them but looking at individuals likes

Rockhold showed that to be a blatant lie. The only parents a changeling ever had were the human ones … something was bound to rub off.

“I almost thought I was going to win the dead pool for a moment there, listening to you two bicker down the hall. I put money on Bular eating you ages ago. Color me disappointed,” said Rockhold boldly while he leaned further back in his chair, still sucking on a sucker.

Strickler glared at the younger changeling, “Get your feet off the table and get rid of that thing in your mouth. It's unbecoming.”

Sighing, the changeling removed his legs from the table, his chair making a clanking noise as it returned to four legs instead of just two. He kept his sucker though, smiling around the stick as he laughed, “Well, aren’t you all sunshine and daisies today Stricklander, and here I thought you would be glad to see me … especially since I’m here cleaning up your mess.”

“What are you even doing here? I thought your position at the FBI kept you in Washington?” asked Walter, his eyes a slit and entirely unimpressed.

“Something stirred up the *crazy* at Base 49-B, so the humans sent me over. Nothing to worry about,” said Rockhold, his grin making him look more foxlike than usual.

“I see,” murmured Strickler wearily, feeling like the changeling before him was making an inside joke. “And what are you sucking on?”

“A cherry sucker. Want one? It might make you taste better,” coyly replied Roy as he pulled a small collection of suckers out of his suit pocket. “You look like a sour grape individual if you ask me.”

Lip twitching, Stricker didn't dignify the request with an answer. Instead, he straightened his jacket and looked down his nose, asking, “So, did you run interference with the Bular incident? We don’t need another Centralia incident.”

“The dashcam and all its backups met an unfortunate and glitchy end. And the kids, everyone thinks they’re suffering from group hysteria, but if they keep yacking, they can always *conveniently* fall off a bridge or something,” said Roy simply.

“And what of the Sergeant who found the children?” said Walter stiffly, trying not to twitch at the mention of his students meeting a

grizzly end.

“I told him he should consider early retirement. That head wound might finally be getting to him,” chuckled Roy. “He didn’t seem to like that answer. So, if you want, I can always eat him.”

Having long outgrown most troll tastes like human flesh, Walter waved the other changeling off, “Do as you need to but make sure it doesn’t come back on us. That man has been snooping around since the whole Milk Carton fiasco. It is a wonder he has never stumbled upon something beforehand.”

…

The sun was rising by the time they were allowed to go home, and Toby didn’t know how to feel about that. It meant Jim was alone down in Troll Market still and that everyone currently thought he was hysterical thanks to that FBI dufus. *Apparently*, he had somehow convinced the rest of his classmates, aka the Creepslayerz, that there were monsters in this world and that they had taken Jim.

Well, they gave him entirely too much credit if they thought he could manipulate other people like that. He couldn’t even manipulate his socks on.

Thus, now, Toby was a crazy kid. The hospital had even recommended some psychologists to Nana.

Nana though … Nana was so happy to see him.

“Welcome home, Toby,” said the aging woman warmly as she opened the door for them both, the officer still parked outside after dropping them off. They still thought Toby and Jim were kidnap victims and worried about the perpetrator returning. Toby doubted a single police cruiser would keep the likes of Bular away after what he nearly did to Sergeant Gulager, but for some reason, stepping into that familiar kitchen with its familiar smells, he felt safe anyway.

Home.

He hadn’t even realized he had missed it until now.

Troll Market was great and all, don’t get him wrong, but he missed his bed. He missed Nana’s cooking, and he missed the way she would run a hand through his hair just like she as doing right now.

Looking up, trying to smile because that was what Nana needed right now, Toby's heart sank. Nana's eyes were threatening to overflow, her eyelashes heavy with tears that had yet to fall. She ran a hand through his hair again, her voice soft, "I thought I had lost you as well, Toby-Pie. I thought … I thought you had left me, just like Ralph had."

Toby's stomach sank, something wet gathering in the corners of his eyes. Whenever Nana mentioned his father Ralph, his heart would clench. He knew he looked like his father, braces and all. So, when Nana looked at him, Toby knew she saw his father in him, and when he disappeared like that … it probably felt like Ralph had died all over again.

He never wanted her to feel that way. *Ever*. Not when Nana had taken him in and loved him without question.

Feeling his throat tighten at the thought of worrying her, Toby murmured, "I'm sorry, Nana. I never meant for you to worry about me."

Eyes still threatening to overflow, the woman offered a sad smile as she continued to pet his hair, "Oh Toby-Pie, it's my job to worry about you. I'm your nana after all and I love you."

"I'm still sorry," said Toby, trying to blink back the gathering tears. This was their first quiet moment together since he arrived for a checkup at the hospital. Standing here, in the kitchen he had basically grown up in, it put the world into perspective. He still had to save Jim, but he also had to take care of Nana as well.

Covering the distance, Toby initiated a hug, the smell of her perfume filling his nose as he buried his head into her chest. It wasn't a panicked or rushed embrace like the one in the hospital. It was warm and full of want so that the other knew that they were loved and needed.

"I love you too, Nana," finally whispered Toby into the aging woman's chest, his tears being absorbed by the floral pattern of her dress.

…

Jim had concluded that Draal was the worst patient ever. Of all time. In all existence … *ever*. Wait, did he already say ever?

Man, he was *tired*. When had he last slept?

Regardless, Draal kept squirming away, trying to escape like a child. True, Jim knew nothing was wrong with the arm, but Vendel kept throwing them odd glances whenever Draal started asking questions about it suddenly falling off. It took the rest of the night for Vendel to convince the blue troll that limbs just don't fall off for no reason. Once Draal left, still protective of his arm, Vendel grumbled that Kanjigar was still worse before he directed Jim back to the study.

Once in the study, new Alignment Stones were given to the teenager and calibrated. These were larger ones than the last set with perfectly cut edges. And then Jim was given a crash course on Rune Detailing. It was probably already mid-morning by the time Jim finished his first set of protection runes and was sent to his dwell. Jim was so dead tired on his feet that he didn't even remember walking to his dwell. For all he knew, the town guard had carried him the last few blocks like a sleepy toddler.

All he knew was that he had enough cognitive skill to place his Alignment Stones and Detailed Runes around his dwell before he collapsed face-first into his pile of bed furs. He laid there for a moment, groaning in exhaustion. Today almost felt like a full day of Trollhunter training with Blinky, except he was mostly mentally tired instead of bruised. It was probably on purpose knowing Vendel. The conniving old goat.

True, he knew Vendel wasn't being vindictive (okay, maybe a little; it was *Vendel*), but using magic was a good distraction. Jim honestly didn't want to remember being left behind. He didn't want to remember telling Draal his most protected secret, and he sure didn't want to be reminded that he didn't even have Toby here to lighten his mood anymore.

Laying there a moment more, Jim sat up and peeled off his buckle-jacket, making a mental note to ask for some new clothes. Trolls may wear the same things for weeks or years in a row, but Jim was tired of looking like he escaped a cosplay convention by throwing himself down a ditch.

Running a hand through his hair, his mind tired but still repeating the evening's events on loop, Jim pulled the leather book out of the back of his shirt. He still couldn't believe that neither Draal nor Vendel noticed the bulk on his back. The book barely fit, but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Honestly, he hadn't originally been planning on taking anything, but when he was standing there pretending to read through the shelf, he had opened this leather-

bound book at random … and immediately found a spell that could help him.

His Trollish wasn't the best, but it did mention a blade that could cut through magical items. It was a casters tool. Whatever that meant. It also could be used as a potion-makers tool. It apparently could cut through unicorns horn and dragons scale. Plus, other magical objects that Jim didn't know were a thing, but from what he understood from the description it should cut through the boundary band.

Paging through the book, Jim found himself at the beginning and reading out loud so he didn't fall asleep sitting there, "First, one must obtain a Blood-Letter's Blade also known as a Blood Mage's Blade to use this book effectively ... Well, that isn't ominous as all."

Nonetheless, Jim continued to dissect the bulky Trollish letters. The beginning went on to describe popular materials used to make these types of blades, but it did say that the best preexisting blades were always an *innocent's weapon taken*.

Jim immediately reached into his pants pocket and took out Eli's swiss army knife. Eli was pretty innocent. Plus, the knife was taken without permission (though he doubted Eli would have minded) so it technically fit the description. The book went on to show what runes to cave into the hilt or blade. This made Vendel's lesson on runes immediately useful. Then it said to bury it in gravesand before feeding it the first time.

"Gravesand, huh?" murmured Jim to himself. "Wait … What did they mean by *feeding* it?

"Young Seer? Are you still awake?" came a knock on the rough wooden door of the dwell, Kanjigar's voice muffled but very distinguishable.

Jim immediately panicked like a child with his hand in the cookie jar. He tripped around his room in alarm, trying to decide where to hide the book. Had Vendel already noticed it was missing? Probably, if only because Vendel was involved.

"Young Jim? Is everything alright?" came the Trollhunter's voice again, concern lacing his tone as the door started to open.

Not knowing what else to do, Jim hid the book in plain sight on a small study table in the room, piling a haphazard stack of other books on top of it before he awkwardly leaned on the pile, smiling nervously

as Kanjigar entered the room.

Immediately, the troll was on edge.

“What’s wrong?” asked the Trollhunter cautiously as he stepped further into the dwell, looking around before his eyes settled on the teenager.

“Nothing, nothing,” replied Jim in a choked manner, moving away from his book pile only to awkwardly have to catch the leaning stack since it couldn’t stand on its own. “Just some light reading before bed.”

Kanjigar eyed him suspiciously for a moment before he seemed to accept the response. Instead, he sighed, “Seer Jim … I wanted to speak about what happened this night. I know that the circumstances are far from ideal, but –“

Jim put up a hand, suddenly angry and exhausted, “I don’t want to talk about this right now, Kanjigar. *Far from ideal* is an understatement. It's obvious that you didn't catch my friends, so if that’s what you’ve come to talk about, I’m going to bed instead.”

Frowning deeply, the troll shifted on his feet apprehensively before nodding, “As you wish, Seer Jim. I did come for another reason though. Vendel mentioned that something tried to enter your dream-scape last time you slept.”

Jim’s stomach sank at the reminder. It felt like *days* since he slept last … but it had only been a day and he was no longer tired. Maybe, he should just *not sleep* today.

Swallowing thickly, Jim rubbed the back of his neck, “Oh, yeah, *that*.”

Kanjigar nodded, noting the teenager’s change in behavior immediately. If he smelled a slight tang of fear from the boy, he decided not to mention it. Instead, he continued, “I see that you have already been given new Alignment Stones. Very good. Vendel also asked for me to perform a Sentinel's Array in the dwell before you rested for some added protection.”

Jim, absentmindedly plucking at his boundary bracelet, stalled, suddenly curious, “Sentinel’s Array? What is that?”

Humming, Kanjigar plucked a piece of writing chalk from the little writing-table, his hand lashing out to keep the book pile from toppling

over. Jim suddenly looked nervous, but the blue troll waved it off, “Nothing to be frightened of, Young Jim. Arrays are complicated magic that alchemists generally favor. It is a combination of Detailed Runes and Ley Line Calculation and can be somewhat temperamental if done inaccurately.”

Looking from the chalk to Kanjigar’s surprisingly nervous expression, Jim took on a concerned frown, “Do you know how to make an Array?”

Sighing, one of his hands coming up and pinching his nose bridge, Kanjigar admitted, “Magic is not my forte.”

Still kind of angry at the trolls but far from ever wanting to hurt one unnecessarily, Jim offered his hand out for the chalk, “Vendel taught me the basics on Rune Detailing this morning. I can try it.”

Shaking his head, Kanjigar added, “No, I cannot allow you to do that, Young Jim. I appreciate the offer, you will be a fine wizard one day, but a Sentinel’s Array is something that requires Daylight’s magic. I was taught how to do it during my Trollhunter training, but it has never been asked of me until now.”

“You were taught during your Trollhunter training?” repeated Jim, his chest feeling somewhat tight. Was that something he was supposed to be taught? Had he slept through that lesson or ignored that book? Or had he not been skilled enough as a Trollhunter to be taught?

“Yes,” said Kanjigar simply as he walked over to the southern wall, drawing a small circle with the chalk and then a rune signifying South in the middle. “All Trollhunter’s are taught the basics of magic since the amulet does give a source to use. Nothing to the caliber you will be learning, Seer Jim, but magic did bestow the title of Trollhunter on us after all. It only makes sense to learn some. As a Trollhunter, it's normal to face a colorful collection of challenges and opponents after all.”

The troll then headed West, North, and East drawing other such circles on the walls, completely ignorant to Jim’s troubled expression.

“Now, for the main array. It has to be in the middle of the dwell,” said Kanjigar to himself, stepping before the main door and kicking away a worn rug that was held together with duct tape. He then got into his knee and started to draw a large circle, lines crisscrossing about inside. He added several other runic symbols inside as well as a few Trollish ones. Soon, he huffed in satisfaction, apparently pleased with

himself.

Jim smiled weakly as Kanjigar stood, part of him wanting to storm out of the dwell and ask Blinky why he hadn't been deserving of magic lessons as the Trollhunter. Then again, if it was Vendel that taught those things, everything made sense. Plus, Jim had a school year to learn everything, Kanjigar had decades. So, it wasn't worth blowing his cover as an ex-Trollhunter. Draal already seemed traumatized by the information, and he didn't want Blinky looking at him like that as well.

"Stand back please," said Kanjigar, holding the amulet over the array and using the translator setting. Then, seemingly satisfied, the troll called Daylight to his hands, the large blade lighting up the room.

Jim tried not to seem envious, part of him missing the weight of that blade and its light. He felt so helpless without it and none of the blades Draal gave him were quite right. So, instead of staring, he looked down at the complete array.

Kanjigar was now muttering something in Trollish, low and barely audible. Daylight seemed to glow a little brighter and then he tapped the blade's tip into the middle of the circled array. It reacted immediately, a stiff breeze seeming to come out of nowhere and shock Jim, making the boy take a step back as the lines in the array all started to light up including the small ones on the walls.

The Trollhunter didn't react though. He just kept muttering, the wind now twirling around the array like a mini typhoon. The light was getting brighter and brighter until the lines started to burn into the floor and walls. Then, as quickly as it started, it was over, a flash of light causing Jim to close his eyes and turn his gaze away.

The teenager was still seeing spots when Kanjigar stepped before him, placing a hand on his shoulder, "The Sentinel's Array is complete. It will guard you against unseeing entities and if one does manage to enter uninvited, I will know immediately as the caster. Now, rest. It's been a hard day for you, Young Jim."

Still blinking spots away, Jim watched the troll leave, and then he was alone once more. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, staring at the burned symbol on the floor. He knew he should read the stolen book, but he suddenly felt so very tired. So, he made a compromise and took the small leather book simply labeled *Bleeding Magic* to bed. He was asleep before he even finished reading two pages.

In the middle of the room, the Sentinel's Array lit up for a moment before fading once again.

Chapter End Notes

I should write a timeline for this. Jim really hasn't been down there that long, which is hard to note when there are 33 chapters. XD

Anyway, this chapter was a mixed basket. Got some Strickler time, Toby hugs, and Jim magic. I really love hug scenes. My fic Reluctant Hero recently had a lot of them, so those feels kind of made their way over here. It's probably a way to counteract all the angst everywhere. As for the world-building, well, who doesn't love a little magic?

Speaking of which, is there an official release date for Wizards yet? I thought it was supposed to come out before the end of the year.

Group Chat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eli sat on the toilet, pants up, and lid down while his fingers flew across his cellphone's screen. It was the only place he could get any peace since the *incident*. It had only been two days and that's what all the adults were calling it. *Mass hysteria* just seemed too emotionally insensitive apparently.

“Eli, honey? Are you okay in there?” called his mom, the woman ten times more overprotective than usual. Pepperjack almost dropped his phone in surprise. He had been told not to contact his *little friends* until this had all been cleared up, and generally, he would have listened to her.

But not today.

Today, he was a *rebel*.

“Eli? Did you hear me? I'm going to break down the door if I don't get a response in 3 … 2 …”

“Yeah,” squeaked Eli, nearly dropping his phone again as he finished adding the last contact for the Creepslayerz group chat, “I'm just doing … you know … bathroom stuff.”

Rebel indeed. He just lied to his mom *twice*. Would he being swearing next or something worse? Maybe the destruction of public property? Was he doomed to a life of criminal activity?

There was silence on the other side of the door before the woman added, “Eli, you really need to eat more fiber.”

The lanky teen felt like drowning himself in the toilet a second later. All feelings of being a rebel smothered by that comment alone as well as his mental design of cool-Eli. It was probably for the best, honestly. His mental image looked like it had escaped the 1980s.

“I'll check on you in a bit,” finally said his mother, her footsteps echoing softly on the other side of the door.

Letting out a breath, Eli finally found the nerve to hit the send button,

a part of him realizing that this was the first time he had started a group chat with friends. Yes, *friends*. Eli Pepperjack had friends! Mind you, he also had a death troll and changelings apparently waiting for him to step into the darkness, but you know what they say about good company.

...

CheeseStringTheory has created the group **Creepslayerz**

CheeseStringTheory has added **selfieplease**, **MoleQueen**, **Avocado_Juliet**, and **buttthunder**

buttthunder: lame, u could have thought up a btr usrnm cheesehead

MoleQueen: i think its funny, steve. quit being such a butt

buttthunder: hehe , you said butt

selfieplease: dont feed the troll Darci

MoleQueen: …

Avocado_Juliet: …

buttthunder: …

CheeseStringTheory: Trolling now has a complete new meaning.

Avocado_Juliet: and yet its kind of accurate. steve could have been a troll in a past life

selfieplease: or right now , he kind of smells like a troll

selfieplease: and eats like one 2

buttthunder: not cool claire , not cool . im injured and cant properly defend myself

buttthunder: and thats hurtful mary

MoleQueen: just take your pain pills and calm down steve , it was just some bruised ribs

MoleQueen: ok , this meeting has come to order

MoleQueen: does anyone have an image of a gavel

buttthunder: whats a gavel ???

selfieplease: something you will prbly become familiar with in your adult life

MoleQueen: [highfive.jpg]

CheeseStringTheory: [gavel.jpg]

Avocado_Juliet: ok, enough picking on steve , is anyone not under house arrest ?

selfieplease: mom threatened to take my phone if I left the house without first talking to a therapist

selfieplease: i cant risk the nuthouse claire , theres no cellphones or makeup in there

selfieplease: a girl needs her warpaint , i cant pull off crazy

MoleQueen: same , my dads treating me like im emotionally unstable

MoleQueen: if i catch him stapling pillows to the walls , im moving in with the trolls

Avocado_Juliet: at least your dad didnt contact a curandero to cleanse you and the house , im not possessed !

selfieplease: that sounds rough clairebear

MoleQueen: yeah sounds like your dad is crushing your 'spirit'

MoleQueen: [drumroll.jpg]

Avocado_Juliet: hilarious , how about you steve/eli ?

buttthunder: first of all , dont slash my name with his

selfieplease: ill ship that

MoleQueen: same

StringCheeseTheory: Am I missing the joke? I don' t get it guys.

selfieplease: so pure , girls we must corrupt him

MoleQueen: i second that

Avocado_Juliet: focus guys , we can corrupt eli later

Avocado_Juliet: now, can either of you guys get out to check on jack or gulager ?

CheeseStringTheory: I can't. Mom checks on me every few minutes.

Avocado_Juliet: steve ?

buttthunder: really , you want the crippled guy to go out there ? coach said i should stay in bed as my ribs heal

MoleQueen: mmm ribs

Avocado_Juliet: focus Darci

Avocado_Juliet: and they were bruised , not broken

selfieplease: why are you talking to coach anyway , did he come to check on you at your house ?

buttthunder: what , NO , why would he do that

Avocado_Juliet: …

selfieplease: …

MoleQueen: …

CheeseStringTheory: I'm so confused.

Avocado_Juliet: is there something you need to tell us about steve ?

buttthunder: NO! everythings fine !

buttthunder: ill see if I can get ahold of jack , at least I know he wont make fun of me

MoleQueen: i wouldnt count on it steve , you are kind of an easy target

buttthunder: …

buttthunder: i hate all of you

buttthunder has left the group

...

It was already mid-afternoon and Sargent Ben Gulager was still in his police cruiser stewing. Well, it wasn't *his* cruiser. It was an older model while his was in the shop. Nonetheless, even though the seat wouldn't adjust to just the way he liked, it allowed him to do his job. He would serve and protect … even if the rest of the city believed that fake FBI agent that those kids were crazy.

This was just like poor Jack Sturges all over again, except this time he fell into the crazy department with the witness.

Ben stalled at the thought, his lukewarm cup of coffee an inch from his lips as he stared out the windshield towards the coffee shop across the street. There, sitting at a small circular table with a cup of his own, was Agent Roy Rockhold. And he was simply sitting there, no newspaper or phone in hand. He was just *there* across the street, smirking at Ben's car.

Even from this distance, Ben was certain that the man had far too many teeth.

Swallowing thickly, a primal fear curled in his stomach, the teens' warning echoing in his head about changelings.

Gulager wouldn't call himself a coward, but it was then and there that he knew that Roy Rockhold had followed him into the coffee house, had probably watched him all morning, and he hadn't noticed until now. The man obviously hadn't wanted him to notice until right then and there either.

The hairs couldn't help but raise on the back of his neck.

He was being hunted.

Then, before Ben could blink, a large truck drove by blocking Roy completely from sight. It was just for a second, a rush of moving metal, but once the truck had passed, Rockhold was gone. The only proof he had been there at all was a lone coffee cup and the dumbfounded server with black and indigo hair. Even the college kid seemed confused as he looked around. Where had he gone?

If it was possible, the sergeant's stomach sunk further as he glanced around hurriedly. It was as if the man was a ghost. A thing of the night that was just waiting for him to lower his guard, to look away, and then it would snap its jaws. He would dig in, ripping at soft flesh and –

Tick, tick, tick.

The aging man jumped as someone knocked on his passenger's window, crushing his coffee cup in hand and sending a wave of semi-chilled liquid down his shirt. He hissed, squirmed, and quickly tried to pat the liquid off.

It took a good minute before Ben finally turned his head to see who had knocked on his car window. There was a saying about speaking the devil's name. He comes when you call him, wanted or not.

It seemed that thinking Jack Sturges' name had a similar effect.

Slowly rolling down the passenger window, Ben coughed into his hand awkwardly before asking, "Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Sturges?"

It was weird calling little scared, terrified, and *oh-so-certain* Jack Sturges: *Mr. Sturges*. He still remembered that shaking kid that had told every officer in town that a monster had taken his baby brother, Jimbo. He had just been a rookie at the time, barely out of his own parent's house and the academy, but he had never forgotten. There are just some things you carry with you, like scars right beneath the skin.

"Sorry to have frightened you, Ben. I was just wondering if you were up for a chat," asked Jack as he leaned into the car window slightly, his eyes shifting around the street in a paranoid manner.

The officer raised a confused brow before Jack added, "The kids sent me to speak with you. After all, I know a thing or two about keeping changelings off your back."

Frowning, wondering how Jack had gotten into contact with the kids, he unlocked the passenger door and waved the other man in, "J-just as wells s-s-sit down, M-Mr. Sturges. I-I have a f-feeling we are in f-for a long dis-discussion."

Nodding, Jack opened the door and sat down as he looked around, "Call me Jack. And I wish I could say this is the first time I've been in

a cop car, but then I would be lying."

Ben, besides himself, chuckled for the first time that day. Maybe it was because he now knew someone that wasn't a teenager had his back or maybe it was because, after all this time, he finally got a chance to help little Jack Sturges with his monsters. The only unfortunate thing was that they had apparently become his monsters as well.

"So, w-where d-do we s-start?" asked Ben.

"How about horseshoes?" replied Jack, opening a satchel he had brought with him, an iron horseshoe being revealed to him. "And do you have any medieval weapons perchance? It's just that iron tools make the best traps. Also? Do you know how to group chat? The teenagers asked."

Ben's mustache twitched. What had he gotten himself into?

…

It seemed to have become a reoccurrence of late, but Draal and BaaAch once again found themselves hidden in the bushes, watching humans like it was an evening sport. They even had to recruit some of the town guards to help watch some of the houses. After all, all these humans had escaped Troll Market and they had to check if any witch hunts had occurred.

It had happened in the old country a lot, apparently. Quite a few humans had gotten burned at the stake for consorting with *demons*.

Please, demons hadn't been seen in a millennium and they looked nothing like trolls.

Nonetheless, so far, there seemed to be no signs of public panicking. Well, not from the masses. Just the adolescents' propagators from the look of it. All the human whelps that had been observed so far were housebound like prisoners and no one seemed to be listening to their ramblings. Things couldn't have worked out better.

In fact, everything fell into place too easily. Nothing ever worked that perfectly.

Draal could only rumble in worry, scratching at his arm absentmindedly. Something was amiss here.

“The human girl is imprisoned, Draal. Her parents are on high alert and are unlikely to leave her out of their sight. I doubt any changelings or even Bular would dare invade that house. We can probably report back to your father now,” said BaaAch in whispered Trollish as he turned away from the window they were peeking through. Currently, Claire was pouting on the living room couch as her parents sat on either side of her. The girl had barely been allowed to go to the bathroom by herself.

The blue troll shifted uneasily, scratching his right arm again, before he replied, “We can probably just report to Blinky. There’s no reason to interrupt my father.”

BaaAch stalled and knelt there wide-eyed. Draal never ignored his father … unless there was a reason.

Watching the spikey troll tromp off into the darkness of the surrounding trees, the glow of his eyes the only illumination, BaaAch swallowed worriedly. Then, uncertainty banished, the fuzzy troll chased after his long time friend, the quilt still wrapped around his neck like a scarf. It had since become part of the fuzzy troll’s wardrobe, the fabric fluttering after him with its many colorful stitches.

Almost too easily, the fuzzy troll caught his friend’s arm.

Draal stilled, looking confused as BaaAch asked in Trollish, “What is wrong Draal? You rarely ignore your father. Is it your arm? You have been oddly protective of it all day and not once have you mentioned a wanton need for battle or violence. It is unlike you.”

The blue troll rolled his eyes at the comment, the night insects singing their songs lazily all around them as BaaAch continued to grip his arm. Slowly, as if the stone was frail, Draal pulled his arm away. It had been nearly three days since Seer Jim had told him about his arm, about how he had been crippled and useless in the future, and it was already eating at him.

He couldn’t even look his sire in the eye, he was so disappointed with himself.

Dropping his arm to his side, Draal sighed and dwelt on his feelings for a moment. He didn't like it. Talking about feelings wasn't really in a troll's nature, but BaaAch was his oldest companion and he feared he might crumble if he didn't get to speak with someone about it.

Snorting, his teeth grinding as he searched for the right words, Draal admitted, “I fear I am a swindler of the people, BaaAch. I am not worthy of the town guards’ respect nor my father's. I cannot bring myself to even meet his gaze right now.”

BaaAch stood there a moment, stony brow raising. “Is this because the human whelps escaped you at the stairs? No one in town blames you for that and certainly not your father. Everyone agrees that the Seer saw how they could escape and made sure they did. You are not an enchanter. How were you to know?”

Draal gave his friend a wretched look, glancing around the quiet woods before he muttered, “But it was my fault. The Seer. He …”

The blue troll’s words failed him, shame overcoming him. BaaAch was basically his battle-brother. He could be trusted with all his secrets and failures. Yet, he wasn't so sure now. Never had his own words felt like they were choking him.

“He what?” asked BaaAch, his eyes going wide. The fuzzy troll hadn’t interacted with the Seer very much, but the town’s guard all said he was an odd whelp. He was very familiar with Troll Market and all its hidey holes. Personally, BaaAch felt like uncanny magical was best ignored when possible.

When Draal wouldn’t meet his gaze, BaaAch felt his stomachs sink, the first thing he thought of escaping his mouth, “Did he curse you?”

Draal huffed at that, rolling his eyes, “It’s a rumor that the boy is learning curses, BaaAch. Vendel is teaching him only good magic. Traditional stone magics and the lot.”

The fuzzy troll frowned and leaned back, his words soft, “Then what of the rumor that the boy has been wandering the market asking for cursed items?”

Raising a brow, Draal was pulled from his slump, “And, pray tell, what has Seer Jim been asking for?”

BaaAch leaned in like it was a dirty secret that had spread entirely too quickly, “I heard he was looking for things like grave sand and a cap bowl.”

The blue troll frowned, a rumble escaping him as if he was thinking before he added, “And why would he be looking for such *taboo* items?”

Shrugging, BaaAch added, “Well, who doesn’t want a good old fashion skull bowl filled with the ground dead in their dwelling? Maybe he’s going to make a mini-sand garden out of it?”

Draal huffed at the artist’s sarcasm, “It’s more like he doesn’t know what the items are.”

“Well, if he starts asking for some stone hearts to go with it, then we know he’s creating a curse,” said the reddish troll as he readjusted his quilt-scarf, a few fireflies rising from the grass as he moved his feet. “But in all seriousness, what is wrong my friend?”

Looking at his hand, wiggling the fingers as if to make sure it was still there, Draal sighed heavily and mumbled, “The seer said something to me the other day near the crystal steps, and I just …”

Words failed him again. BaaAch probably wouldn’t judge him for being a failure, but saying the truth aloud, that he truly was unworthy of his father’s title, was like giving the premonition life. If he didn’t vocalize it, maybe it would become less true.

“I knew it. The curse won’t let you talk about it. Okay, I need you to act out what happened, and I will try to guess the words. If you can’t even act out what the curse is, flap your arms,” said BaaAch sternly as he grabbed his companion by the shoulders and shook him as if he was an invalid.

Draal rolled his eyes again and broke his friend’s grasp, “It is not a curse, BaaAch … though I admit it feels like one.”

His battle-brother gave him a confused look which prompted the blue troll to add bitterly, “Knowing the future is a burden, my friend. I know not how Seer Jim can rise from his own bed with the weight of it.”

The fuzzy troll’s face fell as the truth dawned on him. The silence hung there, sounds of the woods trying to fill the stillness before the artist finally spoke, “Have you told Vendel or your father? Any news of the future should be given to them, Draal.”

Eyes closing, the blue troll shook his head, “It is my future that he gave me, BaaAch, and I wish to keep it to myself.”

Humming in acknowledgment, BaaAch couldn’t help but add, “So, how long are you going to try and ignore your father? He’s bound to notice sooner or later that you are snubbing him, and you’ve never

been able to lie to him."

Draal could only sigh, running his hand down his face as he groused, "I know BaaAch. I know. I best be quick-footed then and maybe I will be able to get out of this mess."

BaaAch snorted, like that was the funniest thing he had ever heard … and then was promptly punched in the shoulder for it. Everyone knew that Draal was also a terrible hider.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello friends. Its been a long time. Wizards filled some plot holes for Trollhunters, though I feel that the kids rushed the timeline in the past a lot. Something that probably took twenty or more years in the original timeline probably happened in like a week because they were there. So, I consider the original timeline somewhat of a mystery and free for me to manipulate. XD
>
> And yes, I have read Text Ya Later, Trollhunter by lovevalley45.
>
> Nonetheless, I'm looking forward to the next chapter. It should be exciting. I already have it half done so hopefully it will be out soon. ^.~

Sink Hole

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a good night as far as Angor Rot was concerned. Any night he was preparing for a hunt was a good night honestly.

It was a bit slow though.

Looking up from the tree he was sitting in, stalling in his carving of a golem, the assassin hummed thoughtfully as he watched from the treeline near the Holland Transit Bridge. A fuzzy reddish troll and a blue spiky troll had suddenly appeared in the canal, disappearing under the bridge just as quickly with a soft flash of light. The magic gateway to Troll Market undoubtedly. Mind you, Strickler had told him where the entrance to Troll Market was located, but actually having confirmation was another thing. It was always good to know where your prey rested in the day.

Chuckling to himself at the thought, Angor Rot wondered if the current Trollhunter would be out frolicking tonight as well, especially since the doorway seemed busy. In fact, a few minutes ago a collection of trolls, likely the town guard, had exited the same passage. He might have followed the oddities into the surrounding human settlement, but he doubted the Trollhunter would send them out unless he was too busy to handle it himself … or too inured.

Angor Rot had snickered at the thought, part of him wondering if he should purposefully run into the dark prince just to see how badly his skills had diminished if some hapless child with a cauldron and an injured Trollhunter were able to escape him.

Yes, yes. It was probably the latter from the sound of it. Sun stains were a nasty way to go. Bular was incompetent if he couldn't kill a troll with sun stains.

Looking up at the bridge again, the assassin wondered how he was going to get inside Troll Market, interrogate the ailing Trollhunter for the bridge piece, and find out the purpose of the human boy. Mind you, he knew he could do all those things … but the magic that guarded Troll Market's entrance was powerful. In fact, it seemed to have been boosted recently if the taste of magic in the air was any

indication of what was going on inside.

A careful approach was for the best regardless.

Going back to his carving, wondering where the taste of magic was originating from and what was keeping the Trollhunter inside, the sound of snapping branches in the forest caused the hunter to stall. Something was in the woods behind him.

Quickly pulling up his dangling leg, the assassin watched curiously as a set of town guards headed through the undergrowth and towards the canal. Apparently, they were done with whatever task they had been sent out for.

“I don't know why the Trollhunter made us all come in pairs. I am not helpless,” grumbled one of the guards in Trollish, the fuzzy troll scratching at his beard.

His rose quartz companion rolled his eyes, “It's for power in numbers, JunKop. And do us all a favor tonight and get rid of the beard. You look like a dwarf.”

“Pff, it is for Bagdwella,” huffed JunKop as he crashed through the forest without a worry.

The pink troll raised a brow, his tone confused, “What happened to Glug? I thought you fancied her?”

The darker troll winced, a hand running down his face as he slung his axe over his shoulder lazily, “She just wanted to be friends.”

The pink troll tried to keep it in but snorted regardless. This, of course, led to an argument about relationships of all things and some female troll called Lump. Angor Rot, meanwhile, was left up in the trees above the two. He shook his head, unsurprised that neither was lucky with the lady trolls. And honestly, he had better places to be for the night was still young. He didn't need to be stuck in these branches listening to two lovesick imbeciles. That is until the fuzzy one asked, “Do you have the horngazel? That's how Vendel thinks the humans got in. Some fool dropped one. I bet it was that wanderer, Krax. He's always leaving Trollmarket to do Deya knows what.”

The pink troll grunted in agreement and pulled out a glowing stone: a piece of the Heartstone specifically. It was an old magical trope for securing troll dwells. The size of the Heartstone contained within decided the strength of the entrance spell. So, for the most part, it was

secure and reliable … until some troll lost their key, usually with the decapitated hand still holding it. At least that was from Angor Rot's personal experience.

Manipulating his long limbs like a monkey, Angor Rot made his way around the branches above until he was able to land soundlessly behind the two bickering trolls. His eyes glowed with almost a sense of glee as he pulled out his Creeper's Sun blade, the answer to all of his problems before him.

Rising up to his full height, part of him wondering how long he could stand here before the two fools would notice him, the assassin decided to cheekily interject. “I would have to agree, that beard won't do. In fact, the way it sounds, neither one of you will make the *cut* when it comes to the ladies.”

Both trolls barely had enough time to turn around before Angor Rot's blade was slicing into them, cutting them down to their cores and stealing their lives from them. It seemed almost effortless on his part, practically too easy, but he was the Pale Lady's assassin after all. He took pride in being efficient.

Stepping up to the two forms, Angor Rot looked them over for a moment before he looked at the remains of fuzzy troll first, taking a claw and chipping part of the stone beard off. He chuckled to himself at that and then reached for the glowing rock in the previously pink troll's hand. He had to tug a little bit, a stone thumb being lost in the grass below, but now he had his key into Troll Market.

Humming to himself, giving the two stone beings a wicked smile, Angor Rot added, “Don't worry gentle trolls. I'm sure you troll ladies won't notice your absence. They'll be too busy noticing that I'm a real scream.”

...

“This is a dress,” was the first thing out of Jim’s mouth when Bogg of the town guard offered him the clothing that he asked for earlier.

It was two days going on three. He still couldn’t believe that much time had passed without Toby’s quirky presence. In fact, not one of the Creepslayerz had returned in that time and honestly, he was a little upset. Personally, he hoped that they were just concocting a new escape plan for him or at the very least were grounded. Then again, maybe no one had returned because something terrible had happened. Perhaps the Janus Order caught them, or maybe Bular had found them

and -

No. Nope. He needed to stop that train of thought right there. He was running circles around himself like that and though Kanjigar treated him like a helpless child, the Trollhunter had yet to lie to him. If anything had happened to Toby, Kanjigar would have told him.

“But it’s nice. Very pretty. Breezy too,” said the town’s guard in English, interrupting Jim’s thoughts as a large hand fluffed the puffy blue and yellow skirt.

Jim sighed and ran a hand down his face. At this rate, he really was going to become a Disney Princess, especially if they kept trying to dress him in ball gowns. Where did they even get this ball gown? Arcadia Oaks didn’t seem classy enough for something like this.

“It is … very pretty,” agreed Jim, trying to think of how to explain gender norms and their effect on human society. Trolls really didn’t have a lot of gender roles from what Jim could easily observe, so he shrugged it off and added, “But it's not really, how do I say this, training conscious. I’d trip in this.”

Bogg hummed before nodding, “Bogg understands. Seer needs kilt. Its good battle clothing. Bogg will go to market later and find something.”

Jim choked on his own spit at the thought of being seen in a kilt, especially if that someone was Claire. “What, *no*. I, um … can’t I just go to market by myself? Blinky gave me some bits to buy stuff and Vendel's troll bling won't let me get too far anyway.”

The large troll crossed his hands over his chest, his tusks jutting out as he grumbled, “Why let you? Seer Jim keeps sneaking off. You going to sneak off and make Bogg chase you?”

Rolling his eyes, hating how he was treated like an escape-prone toddler, Jim groused, “I wasn’t sneaking off yesterday. I was just … shopping. It wasn’t my fault I’m short compared to the average troll and accidentally disappeared into the crowd. Lump should have kept up.”

That, of course, was only half true. He did disappear into the crowd, yes, but he also was trying to sneak off. One can’t really barter for dark arts ingredients with their babysitters breathing over their shoulder. And searching Vendel’s ingredient closet was terrifying given things would randomly sneak out of their containers and send

him sprinting out of the room. One run-in with a floating third eye was more than enough, thank you. It had taken Vendel an hour to get it to release Jim's forehead and the troll hadn't stopped badgering him about wondering into the closet since.

Thus, any excuse to scour the market was good by Jim's standards. His borrowed little book was opening a whole new world of possibilities for him, but first, he needed to create his blade.

"Seer is short," agreed the troll in rough English with a nod. "Okay, market is slow right now. We go."

Jim barely had time to yip before he was all but grabbed by his scruff and taken out to market. The next few minutes were filled with Jim being dragged from troll stall to troll stall, getting stared at like he was an oddity. Honestly, Jim just wanted to sneak away and find the ingredients he needed. Specifically, the grave sand and a cap bowl. He had gotten a few odd looks yesterday and apparently today was no different.

Currently, there was a purple troll just *staring* at him. The troll's surprise was almost palpable. Jim raised a brow at him as Bogg continued to haggle with the merchant for some Jim-sized clothes. Currently, Jim had obtained a Mrs. California sash and three scarves. Honestly, a kilt was starting to becoming his only option.

Giving his guard a glance, Bogg side-eyeing him as if he knew Jim wanted to wander off, the teenager sighed and decided to take his frustration out on the purple troll that was still staring.

"Why don't you take a picture? It'll last longer," groused Jim, wincing when the troll in the stall brought forth a pink gown. He immediately shook his head at Bogg and the guard sighed, grumbling something in trollish to the merchant about picky whelps.

"Why is there a human in Troll Market?" finally asked the purple troll, his eyes know full of suspicion as he stepped up to Jim.

"I'm the Trollhunter's secret half-human lovechild. I just took after my mother," said Jim sarcastically, his irritation forthright. One merchant nearby, drinking glug or something, spit out his drink and spraying all his customers in the stuff. The purple troll, in turn, looked like he had swallowed a boulder and was slowly choking on it.

Jim rolled his eye, leaning against a stone stand as Bogg glared at him, "I'm kidding, I'm kidding."

The teenager then crossed his arms over his chest and eyeballed the purple troll. He didn't remember this troll from his other life, but then again it wasn't like he knew every troll in Troll Market.

“I'm taking it you weren't here for my big reveal or any of the chaos that followed after,” said Jim dryly. “Well, I'm Seer Jim. One trick pony extraordinaire. And no, I don't know your future.”

The purple troll's eyes widen as if he was gut-punched before he messily did a strange troll-bow, his tone almost excited like he was happy for some good gossip, “I am Krax, a wondering steel-merchant. I didn't know Troll Market had its own wizard. The Heartstone is truly blessed to have a wizard to commune with it.”

Jim raised a brow wondering what he meant by commune. Honestly … it wasn't the first time he had heard a troll ask about it and he was almost afraid to ask Vendel about it. If everything went as planned, he would be free from Troll Market in a day or two anyway.

“Ugh, yeah, something like that,” said Jim nervously as he rubbed the back of his head, part of him noticing that Bogg had noticed their conversation and was now eyeballing the two of them suspiciously.

Deciding to take a shot in the dark, since all the locals seemed tight-lipped about it, Jim leaned forward and asked, “Say, Krax, I know you said you are a wanderer, but do you know any merchants in town that might have a …,” Jim leaned in and whispered, “ grave sand and a cap bowl.”

Krax frowned deeply at this and Jim half expected the troll to state he didn't know, but the purple troll leaned in, as if exchanging information for information, “The Sink Hole probably has it.”

Jim raised a brow, the name of the store not bringing anything to memory, “The Sink Hole? Where is that? I haven't heard of it.”

The purple troll chuckled like it was a dark joke before adding, “Whelps generally aren't allowed in. It's in the ravine where the Heartstone's light doesn't touch, the stores carved out along a thin path to the bottom. Its … an unsavory part of the market.”

The teenager blink. Huh. He had never known that Troll Market had a bad neighborhood, but then again he spent most of his time training or at Blinky's learning troll lore. He honestly could say he wasn't surprised, especially since Blinky had always struck him as a troll leery of such places. Then again, it might explain where the historian

was always getting all of those dwarkstones and where Vendel got his less than savory looking ingredients. Really, there was a whole part of Vendel's closet made for jars of cursed things.

“How do I get there?” asked the magic-user softly, Bogg now heading over.

Krax quickly whispered some instructions and before Jim could stop himself, he was asking, “Hey Bogg, how do you feel about earning a pair of really dank socks?”

The purple troll raised a brow and smiled, “I am listening.”

…

Jim, now sock-less in his boots, found himself hoping to meet Krax again. There was just something about the troll, like he didn't mind bending the rules. It very useful when someone is trying to bend the rule or say … escape Troll Market.

Coming to a dark entrance that literally faced the gorge that Tobes and he had nearly fallen into a few days ago, Jim found himself missing his phone. There were no lights leading down there and just a simple sign above that said: Sink Hole. It obviously wasn't a welcoming place.

Luckily, Jim had troll-bling.

Pushing his will into his amulet, Jim felt magic pool there like a lake overflowing. Swallowing, suddenly realizing he didn't know any spells for creating light, Jim hummed and said the only word he knew, "Uhhhh, Lumos!"

With a flash, a blue light suddenly sprang from his amulet. Jim nodded in acceptance and grumbled, "And Vendel said Harry Potter wasn't real magic. Showed him."

Then, looking back only once, the teenager headed down into the pit, likely to create some chaos.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Jim, he had gained an audience in his shopping escapade. Behind him, draped in a long worn brown cloak, was a tall lanky figure … a figure with yellow eyes. It was Angor Rot.

The assassin, watching the human descend down the uneven and darkened stairs to the Sink Hole, chuckled to himself. He had honestly

been looking for the Trollhunter but it seemed he had found Strickler's cauldron boy instead. A boy that was a seer if the conversation with the purple troll was anything to go off of.

Curious indeed … and something that might be of use to him.

Humming to himself as he quietly followed after into the darkness, Angor Rot spoke aloud to himself, “I always did love a good mystery … But not as much as a good hunt.”

Chapter End Notes

> Paw07: Angor Rot likes his bad puns apparently and Krax likes his rumors.
>
> Anyway, a short chapter, but I'm happy with where I left it off. Nothing like a chiffhanger to go with a three day weekend. XD
>
> Edit: Added a Harry Potter joke.

Vow

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim felt his muscles tense with every step he took down those dark stairs, his footsteps echoing far too loudly. To make it worse, his amulet was offering the only source of light as he headed downward, the shadows shifting erratically.

Honestly, it almost didn't feel like he was in Troll Market anymore. The steps were not as finely crafted or level here. There were also these random stone carvings peeking around every corner like hungry maws, barely identifiable in the light. And then there was the complete lack of glowing crystals that generally lit every street in the Troll Market above. This place did not seem to belong. And, to make it worse, there was the odd echo to his footsteps that followed after him. Yes, he knew it was probably paranoia, but he swore he was being followed. Yet, whenever he stalled and lifted up his light source, there was no one behind him.

Grinding his teeth, Jim decided to pick up an old comfort of his and started whispering the ingredients to his favorite recipes. And, if his footsteps were a little more rushed, it was purely coincidental. He was in a hurry after all. It was only a matter of time until someone found him down here. It wasn't that he was afraid of this long and lonely hall, it was just that the downward descent felt oddly foreboding.

…

It felt like an hour later, but Jim finally stepped out of the stair's tunnel and immediately slammed him back against the stone wall … because he was now face to face with the gaping depth of the ravine. From here he could clearly see the raging water and giant crystals that followed the river this far down. If he hadn't been paying attention, that fall would have killed him. Really, why did no one believe in railings down here or the rest of Troll Market for that matter?

Swallowing, telling himself not to cling to the stone wall because it was damp anyway, Jim took in his surroundings as his heartbeat calmed down. It was like looking at the troll-version of Puebloan homes. They were stone little homes, carved literally in the side of the ravine, little paths and ladders littered about almost randomly. The

whole thing seeming to cling to the underhang of the ravine's walls as if trying to ignore most of the Hearthstone's light. This seemed odd at first, but then Jim recalled that some troll species were sensitive to the light so this place made sense. Though why it offered different wares than upper Troll Market, Jim was soon to find out.

Watching his feet so he wouldn't trip over all the misaligned footing, the teenager made his way to the first neon sign he saw. Said sign had a colorful piece of fabric thrown over it to likely dim the light while still attracting customers with its glow. Knowing the sign was Trollish for *goods and wares*, Jim entered the open-faced store which caused the three trolls inside to stall. The mage, beside himself, stalled as well.

These trolls were … different. For one, unlike the rest of trolldom, they seemed to like fabric and furs. It covered them as if they were expecting to walk out into the full desert sun at any moment. It was kind of a culture shock honestly seeing such a different breed of trolls. He was used to the usual orange, browns, and blue populations. These trolls were varying degrees of onyx black with scattered white bioluminescence that reminded Jim of a baby deer. They almost looked like they were slim, wingless dragons that had left their size and sky behind.

For an awkward minute, the four all stared at each other until the obvious store owner shooed the shortest troll to the back of the store to organize the merchandise. He then squinted at Jim and growled in Trollish to turn off the blasted light.

Dumbfounded, the teen was about to comply but stalled. Vendel had warned him to be wary of the dark. You never want to be stuck in the true darkness of the world … especially when you know you are not among friends.

Dimming his amulet while making a point to show it off so that they knew he was Seer Jim (a title he hated but was respected nonetheless), the youth spoke in an intermix of Trollish and English asking where he could find rarer magical ingredients.

The customer troll gave Jim almost an odd glance before deciding to leave like she didn't want to be even in the dimmest of Jim's light. She lingered next to him long enough to mutter something about the dangers of lanterns falling into darkened waters and then she was gone.

The large troll-merchant rolled his eyes at the loss of a customer before he crossed his arms over his chest and huffed hot air all over the human. The merchant's Trollish was strange, accented almost which left Jim standing there confused as he wiped some spittle off his cheek.

The teen should have been offended, but troll spit was kind of a normality since most trolls don't seem to have inside voices. Instead, the teenager asked for the merchant to repeat himself.

The troll rolled his large white and grey eyes once more and grumbled in accented English, “Your Trollish is terrible, fleshbag. What are you even doing down here anyway, Seer? Aren't you the Elder Vendel's pet project or something? A facet to the magic realms.”

Jim raised a brow, his tone weary, “What do you mean by facet?”

The short troll in the back immediately meeped something in that weird Trollish as if scolding the older troll. The owner trolled his eyes and ran his paw down his face as if exhausted. Then, in almost a tried tone, he grumbled, “Listen, I don't need Kanjigar coming down here and banishing me, mageling. Just tell me what you are looking for so that you can go. I don't want to get blamed if you end up eaten or something. I have a whelp to take care of and I don't need the trouble.”

Surprised, Jim threw a glance at the obvious troll-child. The little one stared at him unblinkingly from behind the back counter.

Deciding that now was not the time for an epic staring contest, Jim coughed into his hand and calmly asked about the bowl cap and graveyard sand. The whelp in the back nearly dropped the jar of roaches he was dragging off of the counter (likely to snack on) and the merchant snorted as if it was a bad joke. The large troll's words were rancor though so he obviously wasn't amused, “Figures. Blessing onto the Hearthstone my barbed backside. You magic folk are all the same, bringing in the darkness for an extra ounce of power.”

Jim felt his hands becoming fists, the light of his amulet growing brighter and brighter until the merchant stepped back and the whelp whined as he hid behind the store's counter.

Suddenly realizing what he had done, ashamed since he was supposed to be a protector of trolls, Jim dimmed his amulet, “S-sorry, but I'm not corrupt or anything like that! Okay. I just … want to go home, but first I need to finish this spell.”

The troll, while still squinting, almost looked surprised by Jim's admittance. He had nothing to say in turn though so Jim added almost pleadingly, "Please, if you can't help me, just tell me where I need to go."

The merchant huffed, eyes still blinking rapidly from being blinded. Nonetheless, he sighed and looked back at his whelp. He obviously didn't like Jim, but he understood family well enough.

Taking on an almost tired stance, the troll spoke quietly like he didn't want anyone to overhear, "Fear does not condone evil deeds, little seer. Your light is blue and generally is meant to bring wisdom and peace ... but Gunmar the Black's magic was blue as well for he thought himself a bringer of new ideas and peace to all troll kind. And we all know how that ended, don't we?"

Jim's tongue suddenly went dry and he felt like he had been punched in the stomach. Gunmar's magic was blue, wasn't it?

Yet, before he could fully dwell on this, the troll-merchant was pointing to the left and stating, “Burg knows everyone's wares down here though, so check with him. Just follow the path and descend the first ladder. Go down the path and pass all the yellow dwells. At the end, there will be a shop with a simple red sign stating enter.”

Still unbalanced from the magic comment, Jim was going to ask a few more questions when a young voice called out. It was the whelp, his white glowing eyes peeking just over the counter, “And Seer … you probably shouldn't take anyone's invites to dinner.”

The father troll snorted at this like it was a joke and then waved the teenager off like this discussion was done. Jim, being all but pushed out, complied and left. It was then that he couldn't help but noticed that the trolls down here were watching him, crowding him, and some even leaned in as if to catch his scent.

…

“You want Bargainer … but no want her same time. Burg no deal with caps and gravesand, but she does. She have many things. Forgotten and lost things,” said Burg carefully like he was trying to give a cautionary tale, but his English wasn't good enough to fully express it. Honestly, Jim didn't know what to make of it.

Generally, he would take this as the warning it maybe was, but there was something fishy about Burg (and honestly everyone in the Sink

Hole). The merchant in front of him was covered head to toe in leathery fabric including most of his face. It was almost as if he was trying to hide what breed of troll he was and Jim couldn't help but twitch at his red gaze. It was nothing against Burg, but his red stare was the same as Bular's. And if it wasn't for his slimmer form, Jim might have thought the troll the same breed as the tyrant's son given the shape of his horns.

Pushing away thoughts of troll subspecies and if there was a hoard of Bular and Gunmar look-alikes somewhere deep below, Jim coughed awkwardly into his hand and asked in a rough mix of Trollish and English, “Bargainer, huh? Like a Bargain Barn? Do I need a member's card to get in?”

It had been a joke, obviously, but the troll merely shook his head as if Jim was the daft one, “Plastic cards tasty, but no need any. She take ... *other payments*. Good luck, small seer. And if you make out alive ... you are welcomes to dinner.”

Jim raised a brow not knowing if he should laugh or run away. This dim place was really getting to him, and it didn't help that there was something behind Burg's words about payment. But he had come all the way. He had a goal, and he wasn't going to leave until Kanjigar himself came down here to drag him up.

So, regaining his resolve, Lake Jr headed towards the precarious path Burg had pointed to. He couldn't help but stall though, the hair rising on the back of his neck once he had started down said road. It still felt like someone was watching him even though the pathway was empty, stalking him like a cat to a mouse. Which, honestly, seemed on par with everyone in the Sink Hole. If it was because he was the famed seer or that the Sink Hole was where Troll Market kept its outcasts, Jim decided that standing around wasn't the way to find out.

Knowing that all trolls respected strength, the glint of Jim's amulet grew as if warding off any unwanted threats. Then he continued forward, his steps determined. Immediately, the noise of the Sink Hole's strange little market was left behind, and Jim noticed that there were even fewer glowing crystals on this path than in the small market. In fact, oddly, glowing crystals were slowly being replaced with luminescent mosses, vines, and mushrooms. The one wall was even growing damper and damper until a small collection of tiny waterfalls seemed to drowned out all other sounds, the faint musk of river water saturating the air.

Taking only a minute to dwell on the change of environment, the teenager finally got down to the bottom of the path and stalled completely. What greeted him wasn't a den or a troll cave at all. It somehow opened up to an underground garden of mushrooms and stone paths in mossy dirt. And, in the center of it all, was what looked like a small home upon giant chicken legs. If that wasn't odd enough, it almost looked like someone had taken rooms from old castles or mansions and haphazardly pasted them to the side of the home. It was a wonder it was holding together for that matter not overbalance with nothing but a set of chicken legs holding it up. In fact, it should have been falling over into the ravine with how a large deck and a water mill hung off to one side.

Jim honestly didn't know how to describe the atmosphere of the place, but it felt like something was building up under his skin. Something almost like magic, but different from his own. It was like another type of magic than the stone and troll magic he was learning. And honestly, it almost felt like this place didn't quite belong in Troll Market at all. It felt like it was more akin to a fairytale, the home itself falling out of a story book's pages.

Allowing his amulet to hang on his neck instead of holding it up, Jim stopped gawking and started following the weaving little walkway to the front door. Said door was an odd construct, completely circular with a beak-shaped knocker. It honestly was kind of creepy and the teenager didn't know if it was safe to even touch. There was smoke coming out of the home's many chimneys though. Someone had to be home. Plus, Jim had never considered himself cowardly, especially not after living his first life.

Deciding to knock on the weather-worn frame around the door instead of using the odd knocker, Jim called out, “Hello? Anyone here? I was told you had some interesting … uh … curios.”

“Curios indeed, little mage, but I can't help but point out that humans don't exactly belong down here,” came a voice from the teenager's side as the moss and mushroom clump near the front porch suddenly moved, revealing a being of some kind.

The human choked on a scream as he flung himself backward instinctively calling on Daylight. Obviously, it didn't come to him, but it was probably for the best. The speaker was a harmless looking short figure, probably female if the rough voice and the ragged blue dress she wore was any indication. The blanket of vegetation hid anything else truly defining though so Jim could only speculate that she was

the Swampthing's grandmother as she came forward with a walking stick.

Straightening up, Jim stammered, “Sorry, I didn't see the person through all the vegetation you were covered in. You might want to hire a gardener to help with all that."

The figure stalled on the path for a second as if insulted before she cackled, "Cheeky brat, aren't you? Well, blindness is no case for rudeness,” added the aged female as she hobbled up to the front door, accidentally smacking the teen in the shin with her walking stick as she moved past.

Jim immediately barked in pain and grabbed for his leg, hopping away from her.

"Ooops, sorry mageling. My old eyes aren't what they used to be," she said smugly before she opened the front door, completely oblivious to Jim's glare as she made her way inside, "Well, are you and your friend coming in or should I get you some gardening shears? I heard my front yard needs some work.”

Jim was about to shoot back a cunning reply when he stalled. Toby wasn't here. Before he could stop himself, he asked, "What friend?"

Immediately, his paranoid-Jim-sense went off and he was turning around, his legs gaining a rooted stance as he readied himself for a fight. Unsurprising, nothing was behind him. The strange mushroom garden was empty and the path leading here was absent of any figures as well.

The magic-user raised a brow and turned to the merchant. She was coming off as insane already. So, he couldn't help but ask, “Friend? There's no one else here.”

Those strange milky eyes behind her vine-like hair looked around for a moment before she hummed almost amusedly, “You are far blinder than me, little mage. Best we head in then before we are given any surprises.”

Jim severely doubted he was the blind one here given she was the one feeling along the walls, but he spared one more look behind himself before he headed inside. The smell of moss, herbs, and campfire smoke overcame him almost immediately.

The plant-covered female's house was a bazaar in and of itself. There

were countless shelves lined with glass and clay jars. It seemed that she had even taken to hanging things from the ceiling because she had run out of space. It was slightly claustrophobic except for near her large cauldron. It was strangely free of clutter as if it needed space to move.

Beside himself, Jim was immediately reminded of the cauldron scene in the Little Mermaid. If anyone started singing, he was so out of there.

After an awkward moment of the woman staring at him with her milky eyes, she smiled with all her yellow teeth … teeth that were slightly sharp yet oddly reminiscent of a human's. The more Jim looked at her, the more and more unsettled he became. There was just something human about her like she had been cursed into what she was now.

“So,” hummed the strange merchant, “A bowl cap and graveyard sand is what the rats and mice have said. Noble Kanjigar and Wise Vendel would hate to hear of such a thing.”

Jim felt his tongue go heavy, lost for words. He would never admit it aloud, but he did care what his predecessor thought and even though Vendel was constantly cankerous, he offered praise when it was due as any true teacher would. It was probably a side effect of his dad being gone, but Jim had always looked up to those types of figures. And as much as he hated to admit it to himself, that's probably why Strickler's betrayal hurt so much. In another world, he might have even been glad to have the changeling become his step-father.

He knew it was a stupid thought though and quickly squashed it. His mother loved him just fine. Right now all he needed was a way to let her know that he was okay. He'd come back down to help Troll Market afterward. There would always be time to let Kanjigar, Vendel, and Blinky chide him about his safety. But he had always been the protector of his mother and, magic or not, nothing was going to stop him from doing that.

Straightening his spine, Jim looked down at the crooked old trader and admitted, “Their opinions are second to me as long as they leave me locked down here. My personal freedom is non-negotiable, and I will leave of my own volition. I do not need their approval.”

The old bargainer eyed him for a moment as if judging his mettle before smiling, “You are wiser than Merlin for knowing what you

want, yet as foolish as Morgana for little forethought."

The woman ignored Jim's confused stared and instead turned to a doorway nearby. She hobbled on through it, staff clinking until the sound of rummaging and whispering replaced its clank. She was growling something about a lazy broonie before she leaned back out of the doorway, asking, "And what kind of skull cap did you need, boy? Some spells are specific about the type of species skull you use. Same for gravesand as well. Gravesand can come from any deceased troll technically, but most spells name Gumm Gumm ashes specifically."

Jim felt his stomach sink, realization hitting him like a truck. No wonder all those merchants treated him oddly ... he was looking for things made from corpses!

"W-what?"

The trader glared at him, her milky eyes glowing beneath her leafy hair. "What do you mean by *what*? Do you not know or did the spell not specify?"

Lurching back, eyes wide as he continued his internal freakout, Jim choked out, "I-it didn't specify."

The odd figure grunted and then added, "Then it shouldn't matter. I'll give you what I have then."A moment later she came back with a jar of dark-colored sand and what looked like half of a troll skull made into a decorative bowl. The name Bert was even carved into the ornamental base. In fact, through his disgust, Jim couldn't help but note that was an odd name for a troll.

Looking up at the boy, her grin obvious even with her ivy hair, the trader continued, "And now for my price."

Pulled from his disgust, telling himself he knew a price had to be paid for messing with unsanctioned magic, Jim straightened his spine, "Well, you don't seem the smelly sock type. Instead, I know a few magic spells, especially protection ones. I can even door a few heal-"

The wrinkly old being brought up a leathery finger and tisked, the staff she was holding suddenly glowing a pale purple as she added, "I have no need of an untrained mage's stone magic. What I do need is a vow."

Jim couldn't help but stiffen, his mind crashing into a cement wall.

Here he had thought that was a walking stick, but it obviously was a *staff*. Yet, before he could even question that, the word *vow* punched him in the stomach. He might be a greenhorn when it came to magic, but Blinky's books had already mentioned vows. A vow was a bit like a boon apparently. The fae, a lost race related to fairies, were dangerous because of their boons: promises that were magically binding. Most boons had hidden clauses that caused a terrible backlash when unfilled or broken… unless you worded yourself very, very carefully. This woman didn't look like a fae, which were allegedly beautiful, but Vendel told him to be wary of magic promises all the same. The moment any magical thing thinks it's been forgotten or wronged, it will strike out with vengeance.

Taking a step back away from the fumes of the cauldron and the woman before it, Jim nervously asked, “What kind of vow? Likely it will not be worth the price.”

The old female chuckled lowly, “Vendel was always a good teacher, the old grouch. Let's just simply say, magic folks always come a stirring at my door. One even stole my favorite name a few centuries back. So, while I would be glad to play a few games and possibly gain a new servant, I don't think you are worth the trouble. New mage blood always brings trouble and I want none of it.”

Jim's hands curled into fists and immediately he stopped himself as he thought of the blackened crystals on his bedside, "What do you mean by that? Is there some threat I should know about?"

The trader merely clicked her tongue at his question, waving it off, "I told you I don't want to be involved in any of that nonsense and someone like you will bring it straight to my door. Such power struggles would be bad for my knees and my cauldron has seen better days. So, I ask as the Great Bargainer instead. Do you accept a vow to never mention my house to any meddlers, while in exchange you get these trinkets that will help with your future?”

He knew it was stupid and that the vow was painfully vague. He knew there was something more about this bargainer and that it would probably heed him in the future, but Jim had always been a rash soul. He couldn't miss this chance. He had to get out of Troll Market.

And so, hand sparking with just a small flare of magic, Jim stated, “I accept. This place has a terrible Yelp rating anyway. I wouldn't recommend it.”

The bargainer cackled and reached forward accepting his hand in her own gnarled one, her purple magic meeting with his in an electric dance. And so a vow was made in a splash of two intertwining magics. In fact, the Great Bargainer added a little something to the boy's satchel for his unquestioning swiftness. She just couldn't help herself. She always loved a little chaos and some interlopers needed chains instead of vows to be kept at bay. She had been in enough cautionary tales to know that she didn't wish to be in another.

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The bargainer stood there on her stone path, the chicken-like legs on her house shifting slightly behind her as if making itself more comfortable. She was waving, a crinkly smile on her face as she watched the boy that would be a great wizard walk away.

Yes, he would do amazing things … if they would be considered good or evil, or if he even managed to survive that long, the bargainer could only chuckle. So many got hung up on what was good and what was bad in this world. The old woman had never seen it that way. To her, it was always a game. Sometimes you would win and sometimes you would lose. Either way, she was going to make sure that neither the Pale Lady nor Merlin was brought down upon her house for the seer's magic was bound to stir such titans sooner or later.

Chuckling to herself, still loving that both those great magic users had ended up caged while she still had free-range, the bargainer stalled before turning around. Slowly, she tilted her head up, her leafy hair falling to the side slightly to reveal a big nose and very human-like features.

She was staring at an outcropping above her, a crook smile forming before she asked aloud, “You cannot hide from me, soulless one. I can smell the rage just dripping off you. In fact, I might be able to help you with that. Perhaps you'd like to make a bargain with me? Something to relieve the pain? I might even have a spare soul just floating about to patch that hole right up. A bit too princely for mosts taste, but you might like the flavor of someone once so noble? I mean … that's what you were before, weren't you Angor Rot? A bleeding heart?”

There was a low growl from above as Angor Rot's tall form appeared on the outcropping, the dim light playing off his features before he lept down. He landed smoothly like a giant hunting cat and before the dust even settled, his spine was straightening so that he loomed over

the shorter figure, “I know your kind. You just stink of magic. Who are you witch? ”

The Bargainer continued to smile knowingly before stating, “Well, the Pale Lady stole something from both of us. So I can't give you a name. For now, I am just the Bargainer, and so I must ask: are you up for a bargain?”

Angor Rot snorted as if disgusted. Honestly, part of him wanted to end her, wanted to drive his knife deep into her flesh and watch her become stone, but her next words caused his thoughts to crumble, “Or … if you wanted, I could tell you how to get your soul back? Such truths cannot escape me.”

The witch lifted up her hand at this, showing off the multitude of glowing rings on her fingers. He knew that type of ghostly glow anywhere for he yearned for such a thing in his dreams. It was the light of a captured soul and the bargainer indeed owned many.

Angor Rot jumped back instinctively, a flashback of the night when he lost his own soul hitting him, “Witch! Vile hag! Don't dare touch me.”

The vile woman cackled, not the least bit upset. Instead, she merely took back her hand, leaning on her glowing staff almost in warning, “Do not fear. It's not like you have a soul I can steal from you. Someone has already done that, haven't they? You are little more than a puppet now, pulling at your strings.”

Resisting the urge to attack her, knowing far too well that challenging this witch would probably draw unwanted attention, the troll groused, “I will leave your hollow ground, *witch*, and abstain from killing you if you keep this meeting to yourself. I know little of the current Trollhunter's temperament, but I know you are even less welcome here than I.”

She shrugged, stating simply, “Perhaps, but would you like to shake on it?”

Turning his back to her so he could start up the path and after his prey, the troll spoke over his shoulder, “No. Now be quiet, witch. I want nothing further to do with you.”

At this, the witch laughed, calling after his departing back, “Careful where you follow that boy. If you follow him too much, he might just think you are a stray and you'll get leashed by a new master. But that is just the nature of dogs, isn't it Angor Rot? Always looking for a new

Master.”

A growl and the glint of yellow eyes shone for a moment more before the assassin disappeared into the shadows of the ravine. He had learned his lesson from the first witch he had encountered and promised himself to never draw near one again. At least he now understood what Morgana wanted. This Bargainer though … she seemed to consider the mystery half the fun.

Either way, the witch obviously didn't belong down here, but that wasn't his problem. It was Stricklers, especially if she damaged the little mage. Despite himself, he smiled at that, glad for any inconvenience that could happen upon his current imprisoner.

Chapter End Notes

> I hope I didn't spoon feed you too much about who the Bargainer was. Honestly, when looking at Morgana's bio, I felt she didn't quite fit some of those names. Then I thought to myself, what if she stole a lot of those names while gaining her power. I always liked the idea of names having power, so I figured why not add it. Jim needs to get his ingredients for chaos somewhere.

Personal Business

Chapter Notes

> Edit: I went back to the last chapter to edit a bit and ended up added a few paragraphs because I couldn't help myself. Anyway, it's nothing substantial to the overall plot, but it's there if you want to read it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, thank Deya's Light,” said Blinky the second Jim stepped out of the tunnel to the Sink Hole. It was as if the blue troll had been standing there, gaining the willpower to go down there alone. Luck seemed to be on his side though and not Jim's. The teenager, in fact, might have questioned Blinky's nervousness if he wasn't immediately assaulted by the handsy troll, the stone being seemingly checking Jim for all of his limbs.

Only when the mage's limbs had all been accounted for, Did Blinky speak, “Young Jim, what were you doing in the Sink Hole! There are man-eaters down there. What if something had happened to you?”

“Why are there even man-eaters in Troll Market?!” immediately squeaked the youth, part of him now understanding the invites to dinner. "I thought Gumm-Gumms weren't allowed down here.”

The intellectual shrugged before stating, “Technically, they aren't exactly Gumm-Gumms since they never joined Gunmar's army. There were other breeds of trolls that had a ...*taste*... for human flesh. Gunmar's tribe was hardly the first to devour your kinsmen."

Jim pulled his satchel closer, feeling the weight of his magical tools, "That still doesn't explain why they are down there. I would have brought a sword or something if I had known."

Blinky gave Jim a look while putting two hands on his hips and crossing the other set over his chest, "You shouldn't have been down there at all. Premediated or not."

The youth shrugged as if claiming blame for obviously sneaking down there, "Still doesn't explain the cannibals, the bad side of town or not. That is something that should really be in the tour guide booklet.”

“First of all,” started off the trainer in exasperation as he started to push the teenager away from the entrance of the Sink Hole, “We all know that humans are curious creatures that like to get into everything. We both know you would have been down there in a week if we would have told you, losing a few fingers if not a full limb,” Jim took this moment to look insulted, but the blue troll just continued, “And secondly, you are using the word cannibal inaccurately. You have to devour your own species to be defined as a cannibal. The trolls down there either have low light tolerance or are ... rehabilitating their palates."

The mage took on a horror-struck expression, his brows rising into his forehead. Blinkous seemed to catch on and awkwardly laughed it off as he took Jim by the shoulders and started to guide him towards the library. His words were a plea in Jim's ear, “Just promise me you won't go down there again. And please, please, please, Young Jim, don't bring it up in conversation around Aaarrrgghh. It makes him quite uncomfortable.”

Jim was about to open his mouth and say he knew that Aaarrrgghh had been a Gumm-Gumm, but then it just occurred to him … he had never had that conversation in this life, had he? Sometimes it was like he was skipping between lives and … it was suffocating.

He really needed to get home and have a moment to himself. A moment from the madness.

Swallowing his unpleasant thoughts, the teenager allowed Blinky to prattle on about their lessons for this evening. Beside himself, he couldn't help but clutch his satchel a little closer. Freedom was so close and yet he couldn't help but feel guilty for it in his teacher's presence.

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“Here's your glug,” said BaaAch as he handed a goblet to a miserable looking Draal, some of the liquid spilling onto the table. “Though I think you may need a bigger cup if you are planning on drowning in it.”

Still despondent, Draal accepted it with a grunt, “I don't need something to drown in. I just need a place to away to as I gather ... my thoughts.”

“Well, you can always *away* to the lake. It is nearby, though I hear there are some unfortunate after-effects when you stay under too

long," joked BaaAch as he sat down with his own mug, humming pleasantly as he got his first gulp. "Besides, I'm sure your dad would find you even there. Maybe you should just talk to him and get it over with."

Draal stalled, cup an inch from his mouth. Immediately, his mug was slapped onto the heavy wooden table, the drink slipping over his fingers, "What do you mean my father would still find me? Have you heard that he is already looking for me? It's barely been three days since I last spoke to him. How could he have noticed already?"

Shrugging his shoulders, BaaAch admitted, "I don't know Draal, but your father's at the front looking for you. Seems he's noticed you've been ignoring him and he's on a troll-hunt."

The spiky troll immediately hunch down against the table even though it did very little given the spikes on his back, "And did he see you?"

BaaAch shrugged again, "Probably, knowing him. So I made sure to get you the strongest glug they have. It'll make your father's interrogation probably less painful. It might also help with that arm curse."

Draal glared at him. Not that BaaAch could exactly tell, his hair now weighed down by the glug he was trying to drink. Half of the glass had probably already been absorbed by his bangs.

"I already told you that it wasn't a curse. It was a *foretelling* ... and it's my personal business," growled the blue troll, all but one with the table now.

Sighing, his glug lonely and in need of drinking, the hairy troll stated, "And it will soon be your father's business as well, Draal. I told you, he just knows things. It's like the power of the armor or something magic-like that I don't want to get involved in. There's no point fighting it. We couldn't hide from it when we were whelps and knocked Looooo down twelve flights of stairs, and we can't hide from him now."

Draal dug his claws into the table in frustration, part of him feeling BaaAch needed a good punch and a fall down twelve flights of stairs. "You need to go distract him now while I find a way out. My secrets are my own."

Drink still undrunk, BaaAch sighed before heavily putting his glass

down, “Draal, need I remind you that your father is *literally* the Trollhunter and he, well, hunts trolls. And I'm slightly terrified of him and his judgy gaze with its one twitch eye,"

"He doesn't have a twitchy eye," intruded Draal, but BaaAch simply continued.

"In fact, he just has to look at me wrong and I'll spill the beans. Then he'll simply hunt us down like the wriggling troll eels we are," finished BaaAch exuberantly. "Now, finish your glug.”

As if the devil heard his name called, Kanjigar's voice finally floated through the tavern asking if anyone had seen Draal. BaaAch waved his hand at the spikey troll's drink as if telling him to down some liquid courage. Draal, seemingly unsure of what else to do, did that very thing. He took one long chug before he slammed the mug down and then growled, “I am Draal the Deadly. I run from no one … except from my own father. Do not tell him I was here.”

And with that, Draal was crawling out one of the tavern windows, a grunt and a crashing sound following after. Honestly, it made sense since they were in the loft of the tavern and it was a one-story fall from that window.

Blinking in surprise, having not expected that, BaaAch nearly yelped when suddenly Kanjigar the Courageous was standing next to him, tone questioning, “Ah, BaaAch. I thought I heard Draal's voice over here as well. Is he nearby? I wish to speak with him.”

Mouth falling open slightly, his mind going a mile a minute because BaaAch always had a healthy fear of authority figures, the hairy troll slurred, “Ahhh … no. He's not here right now.”

Technically, Draal wasn't in the tavern anymore. He was one story down and probably two alleys over.

Kanjigar raised a brow, his armor seeming to glint in warning as the older troll turned his attention to the second mug at the table. He hummed in his throat and asked, “Then why are their two mugs here?”

Feeling like the ceiling was closing in, BaaAch shrugged, “Because I brought both to the table?”

The blue troll raised his brow again, leaning in a little as if to catch the scent of his lies as he inquired, “And did you drink both?”

BaaAch, wincing away from the other troll, laughed nervously before admitting, “Well, I wanted to drink both.”

Kanjigar hummed again, obviously ill amused before he put a hand on the table and leaned in to state bluntly, “Where is Draal, BaaAch? I know he was here.”

Despite himself, the orange troll splintered like soft shale and blurted out, “He jumped out the window because he's upset about some not-curse or something and doesn't want to talk to you.”

Immediately, the younger troll wanted to throw himself into the ravine, but the Trollhunter merely nodded in acceptance and patted him on the shoulder before walking away, “Always were a good whelp despite your eccentric tendencies. Now if you excuse me, I have some troll hunting to do.”

And like that, BaaAch was left alone. Beside himself, he couldn't help but sigh and grumble, “I don't have enough glug to deal with this.”

…

Jim stumbled out of Blinky's library an hour later, covered head to toe in a white chalky substance. His hair was standing on end and the only colors that could be ascertained were the blues of his eyes and the dimmed glow of his amulet's stone.

Coughing, Blinky came out a second later, just as upheavaled and covered in dust.

For few moments, the two white-chalked figures coughed up a storm before bothering to look at each other. But, before either could make a comment, Aaarrrgghh was stumbling out of the library like a wrecking ball, hands over his eyes as he roared, “Aaarrrgghh blind! Chalk no taste good either.”

The two chalk-covered figures cringed as the blinded giant stumbled into a nearby wall. Said impact caused him to fall back into another dwell, the very building shaking on his foundation. This just made Aaarrrgghh stumble in another direction, looking like some kind of blind yeti as chalk-covered as he was.

Blinky seemed torn between going to help his blinded friend or speaking to his student.

Deciding that a little chaos would keep Troll Market on its toes for a

few seconds, the intellectual turned towards Jim. The youth opened his mouth like he was about to apologize or try to explain himself, but the troll interrupted, “It's alright, Young Jim. All failures are lessons and teach us what not to do in the future.”

Aaarrrgghh ran into another wall at this point, causing both Blinky and Jim to wince.

“And I understand that things like concentrating on a stone reshaping spell can be *difficult* after social *separations*,” continued Blinky, two of his eyes trying to watch Aaarrrgghh at the same time as Jim. “But absentmindedness is not the most fitting way for a troll to die and certainly not a to-be stone wizard.”

At this, both Jim and Blinky twitched as Aaarrrgghh tripped through some clotheslines, causing him to start stumbling towards the nearest marketplace while dragging said lines behind him, likely to cause mass destruction.

“Nonetheless, the fault is my own,” continued Blinky, almost all his eyes now focused on Aaarrrgghh and the growing path of destruction, “I am one of your tutors after all and perhaps I should have dismissed you after the first five times you nearly destroyed my work table and the floor beneath it. So, it seems having to de-chalk my library, and Aaarrrgghh apparently, are the prices I must pay for not reading the mood properly. Humans are social creatures after all and losing your human companions must be very detrimental to your mental health. Humans really are emotionally driven creatures.”

Jim raised a brow at that. He honestly didn't even know how to respond. Should he be upset or just confused? Nonetheless, this gave him an out so he could work on the spellwork he really wanted to.

Putting on an over-exaggerated kicked puppy pout, Jim waved his arms and tried to look pathetic while knowing he looked entirely ridiculous covered in chalk dust. “Trolls just don't understand what it's like being … over-emotional and squishy.”

Blinky merely nodded so Jim went with it, amping up the acting as he put on his whiny voice, “It's just really hard being … uh … sad and stuff. I just need some alone time to sort out all these gross human emotions and other things.”

The figures then shared an awkward moment before there was a scream of rage and a very Aaarrrgghh, “Sorry,” in the distance.

Patting Jim on the shoulder once, Blinky smiled and stated, “Well, I trust that you can get to your dwell on your own? No Sink Hole or any alternate routes. I can only keep so much from Vendel before he catches wind of pending chaos. Now if you excuse me, I really need to track Aaarrrgghh down before he destroys something important.”

Not that that was going to be hard. The green troll had literally left footprints of chalk behind.

Nodding as Blinky ran after his old friend, Jim called out, “See you later Blinky … and sorry for all the trouble.”

And Jim really was sorry as he grabbed his satchel and headed for his dwell, the yearning for freedom drawing him forward. After all, poor Aaarrrgghh and Blinky were probably going to get blamed for his escape.

…

A few minutes later Jim was sitting on his bed, looking at the contents of the satchel that he had just poured onto his sleeping furs. It was the gravesand jar and the skull cap bowl … and a small something extra. It appeared to be a scroll, a purple ribbon wrapped around it.

Staring for a moment, wondering if it was just a receipt or something, Jim cautiously reached forward and unwrapped the ribbon. The piece of fabric fluttered onto the bed almost in slow motion as he unraveled the scroll. Jim blinked in surprise as he read the cursive title, “To bind a familiar.”

Now wondering if this was put in his satchel in error, Jim shook his head. He seriously doubted that. The Bargainer didn't seem the type to make such a mistake. Why she wanted him to have this spell, Jim wasn't sure he wanted to know. Nonetheless, he found himself perplexed by it. That was all there was to it, the title and a very detailed arcane spell circle below it. No instructions or anything.

“I don't even think mom will let me have a pet for that matter a familiar,” mumbled Jim to himself as he thought of a stereotypical cat or crow. Nonetheless, he rolled the parchment back up and stuffed it into his shirt. He then pulled his borrowed spell book out and flipped back to the instructions on how to make a Blood-Letter's Blade. So, he had an innocent's blade taken, and carving in the runes would only take a few minutes. Once that was done, he only had to fill the bowl cap with gravesand and … feed it.

It had taken a little more reading of the book, but Jim had eventually figured out what feeding the blade meant. He would have to intentionally cut himself and cover the blade in his blood. It made sense in the end. It was called a blood mage's spell book after all.

Straightening the skull-bowl onto the bed, laying a fur to the side in case he had to hide it quickly, the teenager poured the sand into the bowl. He then pulled out the pocket knife and looked around the room. He found a chisel with little effort because apparently, that was a normal household item for trolls, and then started carving away. His runes weren't terribly elegant or what an artist would call smooth sweeping strokes, but the rough jaggedness of each line seemed fitting for this type of tool.

Handle now done, little flakes of plastic scattered over his bed from the carving, Jim came to the hard part. He had to give the blade it's first feeding.

Already wincing, he flipped open the blade and stared at the smooth metal. He wasn't one to intentionally harm himself, but he had cut himself in the kitchen enough times to know the sting and the bite of flesh parting.

Swallowing, telling himself it was just like any other accident in the kitchen, he put the blade firmly in his palm and pulled. He gritted his teeth as the metal sliced at his flesh, his red blood being tasted by that silvery surface as the unclaimed droplets fell into the gravesand below. Jim made sure the blade was covered in a thin coat of his blood before squeezing his fist and allowing a little stream to fall into the bowl below.

He then folded the blade into an L shape so it would fit completely and buried it into the gravesand.

Sitting there, hand being held close to his chest, Jim hoped he was doing the right thing. He knew that this was considered taboo magic, but if he did it for his family it was worth it. Right? It wasn't like one little spell could turn him evil or something.

Pushing such thoughts away, Jim scooted closer to the large bowl, his legs crossed as he waited for the blood to dry on his blade. After it was blessed, it was supposed to glow and then he would say the final incantation to claim the blade as his own.

Easy peasy lemon squeezy. At least he hoped so. He would probably have to leave tonight because knowing his luck, someone would

discover the skull cap or gravesand. Honestly, he probably should take them with him. He just didn't feel comfortable with Vendel or Blinky finding the items. The thought of disappointing either of them made his stomach sink. Besides, a few more spells in the blood book called for the items. So, it was probably for the best to keep them.

Finally, after what felt like an hour of feeling guilty and just wanting to get this over with, there was a spark. And then another and another, like someone was trying to start a fire with a flint rock, little flickers of light jumping up from beneath the sand.

Heart sputtering in excitement, Jim made sure the blood mage book was open to the claiming incantation. Then, without a second thought, Jim swept any gravesand off of the pocket knife, and immediately his stomach sank. The blade and runes were glowing *red* and not *blue*.

He didn't remember the meaning behind every color of magic, given he had a hard time memorizing every book Vendel and Blinky were trying to feed him, but he did recall that it was generally a color with negative attributes. He once heard Vendel grumble about how thankful he was that Jim's magic wasn't red or yellow. Blinky had disagreed, saying that all colored magics have two sides, but that didn't make Jim feel any better. He could only hope that after he said the enchantment and claimed the blade as his own, it would take on his blue magic.

Sighing out of his nose, he carefully picked up the knife and unfolded it, grains of gravesand sprinkling back into the bowl below. The first thing Jim noticed was that there wasn't a speck of blood on the knife. In fact, he couldn't even see any droplets in the bowl. The blade had literally absorbed his blood.

Flinching at the thought, Jim muttered, "Remind me to put you on a diet, Count Chocula." Finally, telling himself to just get this over with, the youth placed the cut hand on top of the blade and spoke clearly:

"Blade, you have been taken.

Blood has been let and you have been fed.

Bind to me blade.

For we are one in the same."

It was weird and creepy and oddly felt like a morbid love letter. Yet, before he could even dwell on the connotations of that, red light exploded from the blade, throwing his hair up as a breeze filled the room. Immediately, he shouted in pain because the wound had reopened on his hand and something was wringing against it … licking it and tasting his flesh.

Jim barked in surprise and tried to fling the blade away, but it was fused to his hand. He immediately tried to pry it off instead, but he just felt a hard prick like something was biting into him. Figuring that was the only warning he was going to get, Jim grabbed his wrist and tried to bear it. This was a spell and he had to finish it. Almost immediately, the biting stalled though the licking continued. Jim wasn't sure if it was three minutes or an hour, but he was left sitting on his knees shaking in disgust. He lost count of how many times he had to swallow the bile rising in his throat.

Finally, after a millennium, the morbid feeling stalled. There were a few more quick bites and then the knife was consumed in red magic, the very edge of the blade turning blue like the hottest of flames. Jim closed his eyes, wondering if he would feel the heat of those magic flames and if his screams would echo, but then it was over, a thunk echoing in the room as the blade fell back into the bowl.

Pulling his hand into his chest, the need to puke still there, Jim opened his eyes and was drawn back. There, in a bed of Gumm-Gumm sand, was his pocket knife, but it was different. It was much longer now, more akin to a hunting blade than a pocket knife. It was also red inlaid like it had taken notes from Eclipse and did its best to impersonate it.

And, despite being red and not blue like his amulet, Jim knew it was *his*.

Releasing his cut hand from his chest, he almost grabbed for the blade as if to welcome it home. He stalled though, disgusted by the feeling and the memory of how it was made. Immediately, he looked at the palm of his hand and was taken aback. He could see the long diagonal cut he had made, but it was puckered shut, little pricks here and there … as if it had been bitten shut.

Wincing at the thought that his blade somehow not only had some unseen tongue but needle-like teeth, Jim glanced at the boundary

band on his wrist and reminded himself once more that there was a reason for all of this. This wasn't some gross curiosity. He had a reason for doing this and it would be done.

Regaining his composure, he leaned forward and picked up the renewed blade. It really did look like a more dagger-like version of Eclipse, but the way it hummed in his hand was different. Odd yet not unwelcome.

Nodding at the feel of the knife in his hand, Jim brought the tip of the blade to his wrists, hissing out loud, “Goodbye tacky troll jewelry. You will not be missed.”

It was almost funny how smoothly the boundary band came off, crumbling away like dust.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that last section was kind of horrific … but it kind of seems on par when this fics sinks into some slightly dark aspects. XD

Intersection

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is an intersection in Troll Market called Alm's Spine. Even given trolls' idiosyncrasies, you'd probably think that such a street name was very Dwarven sounding of them. You then would be shunned if not entirely thrown out into the sun for such a comment. Nonetheless, it is aptly named.

Upon visiting the intersection, you'd notice the oddity of the stones within that place. How round and odd they are from the rest of the rocks in Troll Market. There is a simple reason for this … because it is the spinal remains of a titanic mountain troll.

No one knows how the great giant troll died and why his spine seems to be the most notable pieces left (though there are some lovely teeth-shaped tables and chairs in the nearby pub called Jaw Bone), but it has been agreed upon that things have a way of intersecting at Alm's Spine: old friends, old enemies, lovers, and that second shoe you were planning on eating. It isn't the greatest oddity of Troll Market, but there is a reason there is a pub near the intersection. It always promises to be an interesting show.

…

Draal had never considered himself the stealthy sort, but he found that his footsteps were actually quite quiet as he rushed through Troll Market, looking over his shoulder and down streets before rolling into an adjoining alley. If any troll noticed his odd behavior, they merely raised a brow and went about their day. There were odder things in this place, especially now that there was a mage in their mists.

Now, it wasn't that the blue troll was proud to run away, but Draal knew a losing battle when he saw one. He just didn't want his failures to catch up with him. And speaking to his father would be an admittance of that future … of all the failures promised to him.

He was a disgrace to his line and nothing great was destined for his name. A human adolescent had apparently been a better choice for Trollhunter than him.

Beside himself, shame and rage rose in his throat for a moment and he

slammed a fist against a nearby wall, little chips of stone immediately falling to the ground as he took a moment to gather his breath.

He needed to calm down and stop these thoughts that ran circles in his skull. Seer Jim's words were now a mantra in his head, playing over and over again. He briefly wondered if he was also destined to go mad.

Unfortunately, Draal was not allowed to dwell in his thoughts for his fit had caused Pong The Burdened, an aged warrior from the old lands, to stall in front of the alley the blue troll inhabited. The clicking of the femme's armored shoulders caused the blue troll to immediately lookup. He couldn't help but physically sigh in relief at the sight of her. Not because he wanted to see her, she had the notoriety of a rabid wolverine, but because the clink of her armor didn't belong to his sire.

He'd face his father ... just not yet.

“Bad evening, Son of Kanjigar? I thought you weren't allowed to destroy the city's walls until you've at least had a gallon of grog in your gut?” chuckled the tall femme in a cool deep voice, her form almost as imposing as Aaarrrgghh's. Unsurprisingly, she had even been friends with the ex-General's mother once upon a time. You could even tell her age by the number of scars and pocks in her stony skin alone. Her form was literately painted in painfully earned lessons.

Pulling his fist out of the stone wall, glancing at the cracks he had left, Drall stiffly replied, “You could say that. A bad month in all honestly. But, personally, I'm more surprised you've risen from the pit. I thought you had debts to carry and curses to bear.”

The female troll hummed at the obvious jab but merely dropped her heavy hammer from her shoulder and onto the stone path, blocking Draal's escape in this direction. She then eyed him with her purple orbed gaze, taking in every detail as if judging her next adversary.

Draal merely shared her stare, refusing to surrender his ground. There had always been something odd about the shieldmaiden, especially since she only seemed to rise to the main levels when something was awry. He honestly didn't even know if she had a home. She was just sometime there.

“As I'm sure you've notice Draal, Son of Kanjigar, magic has a way of stirring things up, such as an old shieldmaiden and all her burdens,” she mocked, chuckling to herself. “I can't even think of the last time

I've risen from the pit's depths to wear my vambraces and carry my hammer. It is an odd change. Something creatures of stone generally dislike I might add, but magic is movement and movement is change. Some things aren't meant to stay the same."

Draal looked at her suspiciously. Though Pong didn't seem as aged as Vendel, she still spoke in riddles like him. Personally, the younger troll always felt it was to keep her secrets. Of which she apparently had many if the older trolls' murmurs were anything to go by.

Shaking his head, telling himself he didn't have time for the femme's riddles, the younger warrior couldn't help but growl, "Magic can choke on my fist. I am tired of its meddling and the last thing I need is a riddle from you. Now, please move or this might become unpleasant for you."

The shieldmaiden hummed, leaning back on the thick soles of her feet, "Its best not to challenge magic, Draal. Magic can be a cheeky witch and you don't have to be an interloper to gain her gaze. Even from here, I can smell it on you, following you."

Wincing, not liking the sound of that, he dared tilt his head wearily, "And dare I even ask what that means?"

"It means you're already in too deep to run away," chuckled the troll with an odd glint in her eye, like a spark of magic that didn't belong there. "And speaking of useless escapes … I just saw your sire up that way. I think he's trying to cut you off."

The blue troll winced once more as if he had just been punched in the gut, causing Pong to bark in laughter as she threw her hammer back over her shoulder. Many might think Pong merely helped Draal for the humor of it, but Draal was quick to add, "Do now think I will not be helping you in your questionable endeavors, Pong the Burdened. This was not a favor that needs to be returned."

He barely had time to turn around fully though when the female troll added, "Almost as quick as your father in that regard. Nonetheless, I must ask, have you seen anyone strange in Troll Market? Someone that perhaps doesn't belong? I wanted to make sure he didn't get lost on his way out."

The younger troll raised a brow at this but didn't answer her as he left. The thing about Pong the Burdened was that no one quite knew what she was after when she was out and about. Some say she wasn't quite the same after the war. It was like something had crawled into her

skin and made her half-mad. Others merely thought too much magic soaked up into her stone, and troll flesh wasn't meant to be a conduit after all.

…

“Chalk gross!” wailed Aaarrrgghh as he ran blindly down the street, a laundry line dragging behind him collecting anything that dare cross it. There was even a live goat tangled on his back chewing away at its cud as if this was any normal day. Being a goat in Troll Market, it probably was.

“Aaarrrgghh! Calm down! Stall! Hinder your forward progress!” cried Blinky as he stumbled after his giant friend.

“Aaarrrgghh blind!” cried the giant as he bounced off a nearby wall and towards the intersection of Alm's Spine, bowling towards a group of smaller trolls that all screamed as they threw themselves out of the way like bowling pins. They even made a wondrous clanking noise when they fell down, but unlike bowling pins, their shouts of anger echoed through the streets like a warning.

In fact, the noise echoed far enough that it even stalled Kanjigar in his hunt.

Feet stilling, his armor singing in a metallic way, Kanjigar tilted his head back towards the intersecting streets of Alm's Spine. He snorted, an annoyed sound escaping him. It was always irritating to have a hunt interrupted, but so was the responsibility of the Trollhunter. And though speaking with Draal was on the top of his list of things he had to do (in fact, it was an ever-growing list that he might have to ask Blinky to help alphabetize), keeping peace in Troll Market was his foremost duty.

It wasn't like Draal could ignore him forever.

Turning around, the Trollhunter headed towards the intersection.

…

Jim's steps felt light like he was barely touching the stone he was stepping upon. He felt weightless as he raced across Troll Market because he was nearly free. He was almost home. He just had to make it through the city… and snag a horngazel off someone.

The teen nearly tripped and biffed it at the sudden realization. Shit.

How could he forget that he needed a horngazel to get out of Troll Market?

He groaned and wiped a hand down his face, sliding into a nearby alley as he heard the jingle of armor. For a second he held his breath only to let it go when a female troll with shoulder armor and a hammer passed by. He hadn't seen her before but he kept out of sight for good measure.

Watching armored troll turn the corner, Jim slid back out onto the main street, his jogging pace returning.

He just had to tell himself that getting a horngazel was a minor hiccup. No need to panic. If he could get everything for a blood mage's blade, a glowing rock on a stick wasn't much of a hurtle. Off the top of his head, he could think of a few merchants that had one. They had to get their merchandise from above ground after all. The town guard probably had some as well, but most of them already kept one eye on him so it wasn't worth trying to snag one from the guards. So, stealing from a hapless merchant it was. No biggie. It wasn't like his mom had instilled a moral code or anything in him.

“I'll apologize to her when I see her,” muttered the boy to himself as he changed direction towards the nearest market street. “Besides, trolls don't have misdemeanors. Nope. They just have battles to the death and caged punishment over bottomless pits. Just normal Friday entertainment.”

In fact, from the racket Jim was hearing up ahead, he wondered if the party had started early. Even from here, he could hear trolls yelping in surprise and anger. Personally, a part of him wanted to go the other way, but at the same time, he knew this would be a perfect opportunity to snag a horngazel. An angry troll was a distracted troll and would be easy to steal from.

Picking up the pace, part of him now regretted cutting his band before he made it to the stairs in case anyone noticed it was gone. Pushing that worry aside, Jim hopped over a few low walls and slid into the street only to yelp as he was forced to duct a rope of some kind.

Wait? Was that actually a clothesline? And a goat?

“Aaarrrgghh! Watch yourself you nearly crushed a welp-wait? Jim?”

Blinky barely got the words out before he was smacking into Aaarrrgghh as the larger troll suddenly stopped. And, before anyone

could even process the sudden meeting, a blue blur had dodged out of a nearby alley and smacked into the ex-general as well. The sudden inertia made Aaarrrgghh spin around like a windmill which caused the rope he was dragging to swing about like a whip. Jim could only bark in surprise as he was pulled into the growing troll pile by the clothesline. His face smashed right into the goat and his leg was nearly impaled on one of Draal's spikes as the four bodies were all smooshed together.

For a moment, all the residents of the Aaarrrgghh ball blinked in confusion as they wiggled, now tangled as one huge many armed thing. Blinky could only bemoan the circumstance as he hung off Aaarrrgghh like a lamprey, his only free hand going to work at the string all over him.

“Look what you have done Aaarrrgghh. We're now a troll knot. A mockery of the lariat loop if I've ever seen one,” said Blinky picking at the rope while two of his eyes traveled up to Jim who was awkwardly tied to Aaarrrgghh's upper back, “And Young Jim, Alm's Spine is nowhere near your dwell. The word of a wizard is supposed to be their honor.”

Jim twitched at that as he tried to get an arm free, hating that he had once again disappointed Blinky. Beside himself, he found himself apologizing while trying to push the sleeve up on his band-less arm. This situation was far from ideal, but he would always hate disappointing Blinky even as it became more and more obvious that the relationship between the two of them would never be quite the same. Apparently training a wizard required different characteristics than training a Trollhunter. It hurt ... and Jim really didn't want to think about it.

Nonetheless, he apologized. This Blinky was the only Blinky he had after all.

“Sorry, Blinky. I did go there first. I even read some, but I just couldn't stay inside anymore,” said Jim simply, trying to keep from outright lying. “I needed to get out. I was going stircrazy.”

Blinky turned all of his eyes to the teen for a moment before sighing in defeat, “I suppose it's only natural for a human to feel confined down here in Troll Market, but that doesn't change the fact that you betrayed your word. The word of a wizard is held in high regard amongst magic folk. Please remember that.”

Jim didn't say anything for a moment, his form sagging slightly as the reprimand. Great, now he felt even more guilty. As if escaping wasn't enough. Sure, there were dangers out there, but he refused to be trapped down here until graduation. He could defend himself against magic corruption and Bular well enough. His mom needed him, and he just couldn't leave her to Strickler. Ugh, just, no.

The scholar must have taken the teen's wilted form as an expression of inner reflection and rumbled, “As long as you learn from this, but know that we will have to study the Code of Flamel after this. Re-earning trust generally costs more than just an apology."

Jim winced at that, Blinky's words seemingly pinning him in place. Maybe ... tonight wasn't the best time for this. Should he just go back to the dwell and try later? Ugh, why was everything so hard?! He just ... he just didn't want to be the Trollhunter anymore.

"Can you wiggle free, Young Jim?" continued Blinky, unaware of Jim's inner conflict. "You are the smallest and that goat is looking at my suspenders straps in a most ravenous manner.”

At this, the four-armed troll shifted away from the goat, causing Aaarrrgghh to stumble since he was acting as everyone's legs at the moment. Everyone on board barked as the green troll tripped about, still chalk-covered and unable to see.

“Careful Aaarrrgghh,” said Blinky, his spare arm grabbing at Aaarrrgghh's fuzzy hide to keep his balance, “Young Jim is on your back and rather squishable. We can't risk floundering about and impaling him on Draal.”

Draal merely looked insulted by this but did try to shift away from the teen slightly as he groused, “Don't blame this on me. Why were you two just standing in the middle of the street?”

“At least we weren't purposely plowing through it. Aaarrrgghh at least has an excuse,” quipped Blinky, knowing all too well that the younger troll had been ghosting his father.

The spiky troll merely glared as well as he could from Aaarrrgghh's back, grousing, “It's a well-known fact that everyone runs when it comes to your dissertation, Blinky. Even I am not above fearing its dry structure. I merely made the mistake of thinking you were further down the street when I decided to flee.”

Jim choke-snorted at the witty comeback while Blinky gasped in

abject horror. A whole argument might have followed after, made even more awkward because everyone was trapped on Aaarrrgghh's back, but as with all good moments ... fate came a-knocking. Jim had decided to look up and immediately saw a very familiar glint of blue and silver armor down the street.

Great Gunka Munka's lost limbs, Kanjigar was coming down the street.

Despite himself, the teen immediately stiffened. The others might not have noticed his lack of a bracelet yet, but he doubted Kanjigar was so unobservant. The current Trollhunter had a sixth sense for trouble and a sharp eye to go with it.

He needed to get free now. A knife would be the best option to escape these bindings but, unfortunately, Jim only had one kind of blade on him right now.

Draal, even though he was prepared to start a petty squabble with the historian, couldn't help but still when he caught the teen's sudden change in scent. The human's sudden fear and quickened tugging set the spiky troll on edge. Jim feared very few things so this was immediately troubling.

“Jim, what is the matter. Why are you panicking?” asked Draal straightforwardly, weariness settling in his bones. It wasn't his father, was it? He wasn't emotionally ready for that conversation.

“I'm not panicking,” was the first thing out of the teen's mouth as he wiggled harshly, nearly causing Aaarrrgghh to stumble again, but the wiggling had the desired effect as his bag shifted near his hands allowing him better access to the contents. He knew this was stupid, running away like he was guilty, but he didn't want to stick around and see if his luck was about to run out.

“No, I believe Draal is right. Even I can sense your trepidation, Young Jim. It's in your scent,” added Blinky, his eyes turning from the knot he was plucking at so he could see the mage in the corner of his eyes. “What is wrong?”

At this time Aaarrrgghh also took a big intake causing him to sneeze before agreeing, “Jim smell like chalk … and moss. Old moss and … magic. Panic."

Jim twitched, his tone paranoid as he tried to find his new knife in his satchel, “Everyone stop smelling me. It's creepy and invasive and rude. I don't go around smelling all of you.”

And he didn't. Jim had learned to ignore a lot of the scents in Troll Market early on given the lack of dental hygiene among its residents.

“We can't just stop breathing,” said Draal moodily, taking and deep intake of air only to stall, his eyes going wide. “I smell magic and steel. Is my father coming this way?”

Jim, meeting Draal's awkward head turn, gave him a pained grimace, “... If I say yes, will you stop me from wiggling free?”

“Bagaloosh,” cursed Draal, not even questioning why Jim wanted to hide from his father. It was kind of expected of the young mage honestly. Instead, the blue troll started to throw his weight around, finally ruining Aaarrrgghh's balance. Before the ex-general knew what was happening, he was stumbling back and forth, trying to keep from falling over with his limited range. Down the street, the residents at the Jaw Bone cheered at his stumbling.

“Draal,” barked the trainer, his second freed arm slapping onto Aaarrrgghh's face just to keep from falling over. “What are you doing? Desist! You'll crush Jim!”

Jim could only grunt in agreement as he felt the ropes tighten drastically around his ribs, his breath escaping him. He was sure that he was starting to get rope burn and if this continued, a cracked rib or eight. He had to get out now.

Desperately, the teen finally gripping the handle of his blood mage's blade and pulled it free, lighting up Aaarrgghh's back with a red glow. Almost instantaneously, most of the trolls reacted by wincing as if they had just been slapped. It was as if they could feel its magic. Aaarrrgghh even shivered, his words low in his throat, “Aaarrrgghh smells blood.”

Blinking out of sync, obviously shaken, Blinky turned his head as far as he could, his voice weary as if he already knew what the teen had, “Jim … what is that glow?”

Draal, having been stilled by the wave of magic and the smell of blood, titled his head back towards the human. Instinctively his gaze was drawn to the dagger-like blade that mimicked Daylight's shape. The item seemed to ooze magic, a red light dripping off the blade like fluid. He didn't necessarily think the blade was evil at first glance, but it was definitely taboo since the smell of blood was radiating off of it.

That was blood magic, wasn't it?

“Draal?” came Blinky's voice, pulling the warrior's gaze towards the historian with his worried tone alone, “Can you see what Jim has? He was in the Sink Hole today. Did he pick something up?”

Surprised by the worry in the multi-armed troll's voice and the admission that good-hearted Jim had been to such a dark place, Draal's stomach tightened. He knew all too well that dark magics clung to things and that it could corrupt other magics … like a young mage's magic. Jim's magic.

Head snapping back up to the teen, hating the minute head shake he got from the human as if Jim was begging him to say nothing, Draal did what he had to and spoke, “It's a knife that is the size of a hunter's blade. It's glowing red and seems to be dripping magic… It smells of copper, of blood. Just looking at it is slightly unnerving.”

Blinky gasped and Jim spared a dull glare at Draal before the trainer chided Jim even as the teen started hacking away at his knots. “Jim, where did you get that? Did someone give it to you in the Sink Hole? What did I say about touching odd things? Be afraid of the unknown, Seer Jim! Be afraid! It's probably cursed and it could easily corrupt your magic. Drop it now.”

Freeing one leg well enough that he was able to prop himself up like a monkey on Aaarrrgghh's shoulders, the teenager sighed and looked down at Blinky as the troll managed to turn and share his gaze. Jim stared for a moment before he sighed again, stating, “I know Blinky. Always be afraid. Fear helps keep the Trollhunter alive. It heightens their senses …”

Jim's words died the second he noticed the confusion in the trainer's eyes and the stiffening of Draal's form. He was instantly reminded once again that this wasn't exactly his Blinky.

Taking in a deep breath as if simply accepting the fault of his tongue, Jim rose to his feet, the ropes falling away from his him as he stood atop Aaarrrgghh's shoulders. He held his glowing blade calmly, not hiding it away as its red light reflected off the many buckles of his ragged cosplay outfit.

“Sorry, Blinky. Wrong you,” said Jim simply, part of him hoping the scholarly troll wouldn't catch on. “And I'm sorry that I have to leave you all hanging, but I have to go. I promise I'll explain later.”

Ignoring Blinky's shout to come back, that the item could be cursed, Jim was hopping off Aaarrrgghh's shoulders and to the ground, one

horngazel heavier. The teen was only around long enough to give a nearing Kanjigar a sidelong glance before he was fleeing down a nearby alley, a red glow going with him.

Kanjigar merely raised a brow as he watched the teenager rush away, worry settling in his gut as he watched Blinky call after the youth.

Rushing forward, knowing Jim couldn't get that far, he almost rolled his eyes at the state of the three trolls. They were a fine mess indeed.

Resisting the urge to cover his eyes with his hand and sigh in disappointment, Kanjigar said, “Dare I ask what's even going on? I don't even want to question what trickery our seer is up to running off like that.” Then, stalling long enough to give his son a stern glance, one Draal dared not share, he added, “And Draal, I've been looking for you.”

Shivering at his name, all energy seeming to escape him, the younger troll could only mutter, “Hello father. I hope you have been well. Can't say that I have noticed.”

Kanjigar's deadpan stare spoke volumes.

Letting out a deep snort, cracking his neck like he was going into battle more so than speaking to his son now that he was perfectly trapped upon Aaarrrgghh's back, the patter of rushed footsteps and the heavy clank of a stone staff forced all four trolls to turn towards the disturbance.

Around a corner came none other than Vendel, the troll's milky eyes immediately landing on Kanjigar. Before the city's savior could even ask what was wrong, the elder troll rushed forward and placed a hand heavily on an armored shoulder, his panting audible.

“Kanjigar, I've been looking everywhere for you,” gasped the elder, his other pawed hand being shown to the hero. On his wrist was an intricate metal band and before their very eyes, it seemed to be decaying, flaking away like pieces of paper gold. “The boundary band has been broken. The seer is free from me.”

“And it gets worse,” added Blinky, half hanging off Aaarrrgghhh by the ropes wrapped all around him. “I didn't get a good look at it, but it seems that Jim has gotten something smelling of blood magic.”

Immediately, every head turned in unison towards the alley where Jim had rushed just moments ago, the heaviness of Vendel's words

striking them all, “Hearthlight save us. I don't know if we have the skills to save a corrupted Wizard, even one that is little more than a mageling.”

Swearing under his breath, Kanjigar summoned daylight and with a simple swipe cut the knot, causing both Draal and Blinky to fall with a grunt onto the cobbled road below.

“Come! Before he gets to the stairway. Bular is the least of our problems if something has gained control of the mage,” said the Trollhunter, his voice ringing like a call to arms.

And with that, Vendel was left alone, because as much as Alm's Spine is a place of intersecting fates, it is also a place where fates split and splinter from each other.

Angor Rot, on the roof above, could only snicker as he watched the breaking of chains.

Chapter End Notes

> Hello everyone. It seems the Tales of Arcadia has officially ended with Rise of the Titans. And be that you loved the movie or hated it, I hope that at least this update gave you some joy. :D
>
> Sorry, it took so long, I just wasn't happy with it. I swear I rewrote some of those scenes like five times and now I'm just done with it. Apologies for any spelling errors. I'm tired. XD

Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim didn't know if it was the thrill of freedom or if the red blade was pumping magic through him, but his legs just kept moving faster and faster like they did not know how to tire. And yet, despite the thrill of freedom, Blinky's last words about the bloodletting blade being cursed still echoed in his head.

Knowing it may slow his steps, the teen gave a quick glance at the blade he carried before turning down a darker avenue, the red light of the knife causing a strange gloom in the street as it chased the shadows away. The light didn't cast far enough for Jim to feel secure in his run though. It was as if the blade purposely only lit enough of the way to move him forward, but not calm his fears. He doubted anyone in Bular's category would come creeping out of the darkness, but he swore someone was watching him and every step he made.

High above, crouching there like a haggard gargoyle, Angor Rot watched and plotted. Then, with a wave of his shadow staff, a portal formed behind him and he was gone.

…

“I'm sorry to be here so late,” whispered Barbara as she sat next to Strickler on the comfy couch in his reading room, a soft blanket spread across her shoulders like physical comfort.

The woman tapped one of her nails on the mug she held, her eyes staring at the empty bottom. She swallowed thickly, her words heavy with the grief only a mother could know, “It’s just … I couldn't spend another minute in that house alone. I was given so much hope w-when T-t-tobias was found, but my boy … he wasn't. I just can't go back. Every corner reminds me of him, echoes of him. It’s almost as if every wall is trying to drive me mad.”

Walt slowly reached over and took one of the woman's hands into his own. His thumb rubbed over her knuckles as if to remind her there were other people in the world, that she merely had to reach out and touch them.

His words were soft, his smile somber yet comforting, “Then you must

give your mind a moment of respite, Barbara. You can have my bed tonight, and I will take the couch."

"*What*? No. I can't do that to you," she stated hurriedly, turning fully to face him though she did not pull her hand away. "It's your bed and … I have to stop taking up all your time. I need to learn to … be *alone*."

It was as if she had just confessed surrender, especially when those last words caught in her throat. Acceptance had started because she knew her baby was likely dead.

Blinking, a pregnant pause settling in the room as Barbara's words seemed to echo, Walt realized he hated Kanjigar an iota more than he did yesterday. It was a strange feeling, to be mad on someone else's behalf, but he pushed it away to focus on the woman before him. Even in her sorrow, she really was lovely, tears hanging in her eyelashes like dew drops.

Lifting his free hand, he carefully cupped the doctor's cheek, slowly tilting her head up so she had to look him in the eye. One of her tears even escaped at this movement, pooling down next to his hand. He took this moment to wipe away the tear, his words a baritone whisper, "I don't mind you taking up my time … and I never want you to feel alone. Ever. We'll get through this together."

At this, he took a chance. Leaning in slowly and purposefully, Walt tilted her head up so that his intentions were obvious. When she didn't pull away, didn't say no, he finished leaning in and pressed his lips against hers.

At first, it was a soft thing, a foot testing the waters with careful trepidation, but then it became hungry, passionate, a repeal from the loneliness of the world as they tried to meld into one being.

The kiss probably lasted a minute, but it felt like an hour before Barbara pulled away seemingly breathless and slightly disheveled looking.

Walt leaned back and smiled awkwardly before stating simply, "That probably was ill-timed, but sometimes the heart is a rebellious thing. Here, you seem a bit flustered, let me refill your tea."

Barbara, who already was overcome and a bit red in the cheeks, blinked at his words and awkwardly gave him the mug. She couldn't help but notice that his calm almost coy smile didn't go anywhere.

That man knew exactly what he was doing and she honestly didn't know if she should be mad about it or not. She yearned for something besides the constant ache in her chest, this feeling of drowning above ground. She needed air and he was more than willing to give it to her.

…

The changeling took his time sauntering to the kitchen more than aware that Barbara watched him as he left.

Part of him wanted to feel remorse for taking advantage of a grieving mother, but he hadn't gotten this far in the changelings ranks for nothing. He needed her because he knew Young Atlas was still alive and in the company of Kanjigar. The mystery here was what Kanjigar wanted with the human, and Walt was determined to find out.

Stepping into the kitchen, his shoes clicking on the linoleum, the changeling's eyes immediately became glowing slits as he sensed something amiss. He nearly dropped the mug in his hands when his gaze roamed around the kitchen finally settling on top of the fridge.

There, atop the fridge like some kind of demonic kitchen equipment, was Angor Rot. There was a smirk on his lips, showing every fang as he playfully allowed one leg to hang off the side. Stricklander didn't miss that the assassin was playing with his blade, carving something into the top of the fridge. Probably a curse or some derogatory term knowing that degenerate.

“My, aren't you the charmer?” chuckled Angor Rot, his knife making a pointed screech as he dragged it atop the fridge unnecessarily. Strickler hated that he winced at the sound, likely driving the assassin forward with his taunts. “If I didn't know any better, I'd say it almost looked like real affection. Not that changelings can love … They only have one heart after all.”

The teacher's eyes tightened at that, recognizing the insult for what it was. A troll with one heart was considered an incomplete creature that would never be able to love. Personally, he was tempted to point out that humans only needed one heart to love, but he'd probably be reminded that humans had once had two hearts and thus spent the rest of their days looking for their other half. Though Strickler was a fan of history, he wasn't in the mood for foolish folklore from someone as depraved as Angor Rot. After all, it was rumored that the assassin gave of his own flesh for his powers... Likely one of his very hearts.

Sneering at the troll, Stricklander turned his back to the hunter and

headed to the stove, turning the pot back on. He then rummaged in the cupboard, pulling out a few tea packets. As far as he was concerned, this conversation would only be allowed to last for the duration of boiling water for tea. This miscreant wasn't worth a second more of his time.

“Well, I take it you have news or otherwise you wouldn't be here loitering among my kitchen's cabinetry,” jabbed the teacher, barely bothering to look over his shoulder if only to further aggravate the bound troll.

“Have you managed to find the bridge piece and kill Kanjigar all in one night?” asked Walt with heavy sarcasm, tilting his head to the side just enough to show his raised eyebrow.

Angor Rot's grin fell from his face, the troll sitting up straight which allowed his horns to drag atop the ceiling and create gorges there. He snorted out some hot air and then shook his head, chuckling dully, “And let that all-seeing eye know I am here? A hunter never reveals themselves until they are ready for the kill.”

Curious at the odd wording, the infiltrator turned around crossing his arms over his chest as he groused, “I have little patience for word games this evening, assassin. Now, out with it. What do you mean by *all-seeing eye*?”

Smirk returning as if it had never gone away, the troll leaned forward on the fridge, his tone almost a mocking purr, “Though I would have liked Bular's failure to kill Kanjigar to be a fault in his own skills … a seer's interference has a way of upsetting the *beheading* of things.”

All the air in Walt's lungs seemed to escape at once, his mind running a mile a minute as it recalled all the legends and lore about prophesiers, diviners, soothsayers, and the rare seer. And seers meant chaos would soon follow, but who was … No. No. Not Atlas. Not Barbara's boy. Such a fate was too cruel.

“It is no wonder they took the boy. His magic being kept bright and unblemished under the Hearthstone's light,” continued the hunter, “But I don't know how much longer he will be there. That boy has a tendency for escape attempts from what I've observed. In fact, last I checked, he was making his way to the stairway and out of Troll Market entirely. He might very well be at his hovel crying out for his mother like a babe.”

Huffing at the thought of Jim's tenacity, Walt paced the kitchen for a

moment, his mind throwing around the information it had just received. This could spell ruin or be an excellent opportunity. He would be a fool to pass this by.

“Fetch the boy when he escapes. Do not harm him irreparably if he puts up a struggle. Take him to your den and make sure he is not seen by anyone within Bular's information network,” said Walt as he held his chin in his hand, his thoughts heavy. "I will call for you when I know what to do with him."

The assassin chuckled at this, leaning forward as he leered, “What … you don't intend to share? Bular would be so disappointed.”

Glaring, his hand dropping from his chin so he could run it over the Inferna Copula, Walt stated simply, “Changelings survive, first and foremost.”

With that the assassin chuckled bitterly, stating simply, “Survival? No, I think it is more like cowardice. Nonetheless, your will shall be done.”

With that said a portal formed in the kitchen floor and with a swift sliding movement, the assassin was falling off the fridge and through the portal. This left the kitchen silent for only a second before the teapot started whistling, informing Walt that their time was up. Angor Rot really did have impeccable timing.

Heading towards the screaming pot, Strickler tried to clear his mind as he muttered to himself, “Do not overlook an opportunity, Walt … even if that opportunity is Barbara's boy. What must be done, must be done.”

Then, in whispered tones that no one was ever meant to hear, he added, “Changlings only have one heart after all. There is no place in our world for love.”

…

Jim’s hands fumbled with the Horngazel twice as he tried to draw an exit. He didn’t know if it was all the adrenaline coursing through his veins at the thought of being caught when he was so close to escaping. Then again, it might just be his screaming muscles given he had just ran the whole way there. Some of the stepping stones didn’t even have time to light up before he was jumping over them. He was close, just so close to getting home.

Finally, after nearly dropping the drawing stone twice, Jim finished his doorway. Part of him noted that it wasn't as neat as Claire's drawings always were, but he still gladly reached forward to activate the doorway. He almost sobbed when the stone seemed to crack, lighting up as the doorway was created. He might have stood there a moment, staring at it as he allowed relief to rush through his veins, but he knew that Kanjigar and the others probably weren't far behind. Jim was finding himself to be a great runner, but a troll could still outrun a human.

Taking a deep breath, Jim readied himself to run as he stepped through the portal. Immediately, the soft song of magic rang in his ears, his amulet and surprisingly his bloodletting blade singing back as if in greeting. It was an odd feeling that made his teeth vibrate yet he quickly found himself breathless on the other side.

Sucking in the cool night air, the boy rubbed his arms as if to dispel the sudden cold feeling he had … and it wasn't the night air. It was as if leaving Troll Market had left him vulnerable like he had lost a thin veil of defense after leaving the portal. It set him on edge even more.

Gritting his teeth, hating that Vendel was probably right about the Hearth Stone's light offering magical protection, Jim took another deep breath of the night air and then was off. He didn't want to lurk under the bridge too long given it likely was going to attract trolls. And while the thought of being dragged back by Kanjigar would be humiliating, the thought of Bular doing the same made his heart race.

He didn't want to admit it, even with the bloodletting blade now strapped to his arm, he was no match for any of his old opponents. He wasn't helpless, but he certainly wasn't a Trollhunter … at least not anymore … if he ever was.

…

Jim's lungs stung as he ran. He had been running ever since he had stumbled out of the cement waterway and into the darkening evening.

Strangely enough, he wasn't running because he was being chased or something like usual … at least not yet. He was sure that Kanjigar would be frowning down at him before the evening was done while his mother whacked the blue troll with a broom or something. That troll was painfully persistent and didn't seem to understand that the world didn't revolve around the trolls and Trollmarket. Jim was still a high school student and, more importantly, a son. He didn't want to

be kept back a year because he missed weeks of school, and he really didn't want to break his mother's heart any more than he already had. He had promised to be there, to be at her side, where his father had faltered. He wasn't anything like that man. Never was, never would be … even if he looked just like him.

Squeezing his eyes shut as he ran a little faster down the sidewalk, Jim quickly took a shortcut through a nearby park and passed some joggers. If they stalled because they recognized him as the missing teen or because he looked like some filthy homeless kid, he didn't care. He was almost home.

Just another two blocks and three backyards and he would be there.

And so, after stumbling over a water hose in Mr. Walter's backyard, Jim found himself bent over and panting before his house. He couldn't believe he had ran the whole way there, but he had a goal that would not be dissuaded. He needed to make sure his mom was okay and then he'd deal with all the fallout.

Panting for a moment more as he lifted his hands from his knees, the youth stood up straight and really took the place in. He had finally made it back and immediately his throat tighten up. Not only was the house completely dark like no one was home, there was a small memorial in the front yard … for him … a few candles flickering like faltering hearts before his framed photo.

Immediately, Jim felt sick. He knew people put memorials up for many reasons, including when people went missing, but had he truly been gone long enough for that?

Shaking the thought off, part of him praying his mom was just in bed or something, he hopped up the front steps and carefully tried the door handle. Unsurprisingly, it was locked.

Knocking his forehead against the wood, the teen sighed. Of course, it was locked.

Ignoring the gifts and foodstuffs on the front porch, likely from well-meaning neighbors and co-workers, Jim headed to the hide-a-key. Thankfully, it was hidden under the cracked railing where it always was and soon, the door was clicking open and allowing him in.

The teen stood there for a moment in the dark living room, the whole thing feeling like some kind of dream, before he called out, "Mom? Are you here? It's Jim … I'm home."

There was no reply, just the hum of electricity in the walls and the clicking of the main floor's clock. So, the teen quickly found himself going from room to room, his voice a little more panicked with each empty space. Finally, after checking Barbara's bedroom, the teen stood before his own room. He didn't even want to click on the light because he knew that not a thing had been touched. He'd heard stories of parents making shrines of their dead or missing kids' rooms, but … he hadn't expected it to happen to him.

Sighing, he stepped into the darkened space, his gaze landing on Dr. Teddy Bear on his bed. He had loved that silly thing as a kid even though it had simply come from a hospital gift shop. He honestly didn't know it was still around. But here it was, with a few pictures of him at various ages on the bed. There was no doubt about it, from the wrinkled sheets to the tissue box on the floor, his mom had been in here crying over him.

Jim's hands became fists, the boy loathing himself for a moment. He hadn't meant to hurt her, he was just trying to help … he was always trying to help and look where it got him.

Sighing again, the teen sat carefully on his bed, the youth picking up the bear and staring into its button eyes. He gave it a sad smile before whispering, “Hey, Dr. Teddy Bear. It's been a long time ... I honestly can't believe she kept you."

The toy stared back with its button eyes, offering no judgment or blame.

The teen sighed, "Mom isn't here, is she? She'd probably be at work, right? Making sure the bills are paid. Should I head over there?”

The bear offered no refute.

Despite knowing it was stupid, the teen spoke out loud again if only to self-soothe for a moment, “Yeah, she's probably at work. Nothing to panic about. I'll just change my clothes real quick and head over. Then, that's one problem out of the way and ten more to go."

Then, feeling like it was needed, the youth patted the little bear on the head, adding softly, “And thanks for keeping an eye on mom while I was gone. I'm sure you gave her some comfort.”

With that said, the youth was about to put the bear back down and get to his feet, only to feel the air drain from the room as a deep chuckle echoed in the hallway, a horned head casting a silhouette over Jim's

form.

“Isn't that thoughtful of you? Worrying so much about your mother? Unfortunately, I don’t think she’s the one you should be worrying about right now,” mocked the deep and grinding voice, a pair of golden eyes glinting as the troll stepped further into the doorway, blocking more of the light.

Jim couldn’t help but drop the stuffed animal he had been holding, a sharp breath intaking when he realized who was standing in the doorway.

“Angor Rot,” whispered the boy as the tall troll dipped his head and stepped completely into the room, the hunter looming over him.

“Ah, I see that you know me, little seer. Unfortunately, I know very little of you as of right now, but I’m sure we can change that soon. You and I … will be spending a lot of time together. It isn't wise to allow magic-kin wander around unsupervised after all,” said the assassin tauntingly as if telling Jim he would be good bait.

The seer swallowed deeply stumbling to his feet before backing up and around the other side of his bed so that the piece of furniture was between them. Part of him knew a twin bed wasn’t going to save him, but he honestly couldn’t get over why the assassin was even here?! He wasn’t even the Trollhunter in this life! Why would Angor Rot want anything from him?

Plus, the assassin was too early to be here in this timeline! Bular was still alive for one. Then again, he had bigger problems right now than figuring out where he messed up the timeline … like how to fight Angor Rot without Daylight?!

Chapter End Notes

> Can we all admire Jim’s excellent cardio at this point in the story? He seems like a good runner. XD

Drowned Queen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can’t believe there was a blood mage’s tool in Trollmarket! I know it likely came from the Sink Hole, but really? Who would be so foolish as to even have one for purchase?” asked Kanjigar almost angrily as they ran for the crystal staircase.

Blinky, panting yet seemingly able to keep up with the Trollhunter, agreed.

Draal, meanwhile, was all but repeatedly pushed forward by Aaarrrgghh and forced to keep up when he obviously didn't want to be there. The younger troll nearly face-planted for the third time before he slapped Aaarrrgghh's hand away and threw a nasty glare back at the ex-General. The green troll merely gave him a look. Apparently, it wasn’t only his own father that had noticed his absence as of late.

Picking up the pace while remaining behind his father, Draal threw another glare at the ex-General. Right now was not the time for any heart-to-heart conversations, but it was obvious that Aaarrrgghh wasn’t going to allow him to skitter off and continue to ignore his sire. The Krubera was probably going to pair them up as well if their group separated.

Knowing that Aaarrrgghh knew hand-speak, Draal started a silent argument with the green troll right behind his father’s back. He knew that he wasn’t likely to win this argument. Aaarrrgghh probably learned hand-speech before he even learned how to talk in the Gumm Gumm’s clutches. Nonetheless, Draal was quite argumentative and brash with every wave of his hand. He wasn't going down without a fight.

The wavey-armed argument about personal space and personal problems was quickly a losing battle for the younger troll, which was simply embarrassing because the ex-General was also using his hands to run forward. Thus, he was using half the hand movements Draal was.

Blinky, two eyes turning sideways at the movement, started throwing

chiding hand-remarks back as well at Draal. He agreed with Aaarrrgghh's words about the importance of communicating and facing one's problems. It was exhausting being sniped at by the two trainers, especially when he likely wouldn't escape having an awkward conversation with his sire anyway. It was no one's business what a failure and cripple he was destined to be. If he wanted to wallow in his misery for a few days, it was his own -, "Ooooff!"

Draal suddenly slammed into his father's back, nearly plowing the other blue troll over as the warrior stopped at the crystal stair's base. Both the trainers winced at this, obviously the cause of Draal's distracted run.

Kanjigar, barely regaining his balance in time to save himself and his son from an undignified landing, turned and glanced at the three guilty-looking trolls behind him.

He immediately knew what was happening behind his back by looking at Draal's abashed expression and Blinky's nervously tapped fingers. Aaarrrgghh refused to avert his gaze meaning he had probably won the argument.

Sighing, the Trollhunter ran his hand down his face before grousing, "Right now is not a time to debate … interpersonal issues."

Draal actually twitched at that, rubbing the back of his neck nervously as if acknowledging that the comment was directed at him. Kanjigar, nonetheless, reached forward and patted his son on the shoulder. Whatever was wrong, they'd discuss it at a better time. Hopefully, it was just a foolish folly of the young-hearted.

"Now," said the hunter, "I'm sure Seer Jim's scent will be easy enough to follow. It has become quite *distinct* lately."

"Yes, he has been complaining about *lawn-dry* for a few days now. And he has been quite displeased with the textiles he has been presented with as well," said Blinky quickly, glad that they had breezed right over the argument behind the Trollhunter's back.

"Don't like sparkly or pinks," grunted Aaarrrgghh in agreement.

"But, in the case his scent is lost, I think it's quite obvious where he will be heading," added the blue troll before turning towards the stairs again, "Home."

…

Jim swallowed thickly, his eyes going wide as he watched Angor Rot smirk wider. Part of him knew he had no chance of winning against the hunter. He had even lost in his past life against the assassin before getting his Triumbric stone. And with the way the hunter was smirking, he knew this was a done deal as well.

Waving a clawed hand towards the boy as if offering a hand out for the teen to take, the troll asked, “So, little seer, will you be making this evening difficult for yourself or easy? It matters little to me if my prey decides to squirm or squeal.”

Swallowing again, Jim's eyes started darting around the room as he tried to think of what to do. There was the window, but he doubted he would be able to get out of it fast enough before Angor Rot snagged him. The doorway was obviously blocked. As for fighting, his sleeve did seem to glow brighter, the blade strapped there and ready to taste blood. Not that he thought he'd get enough good hits in to do more than irritated the assassin. He was successfully trapped.

Angor Rot, watching the teen's eyes practically rotate into the back of his skull as he tried to figure a way out, huffed in amusement. It was like catching a whelp eating the last of the copper shavings, metal dust still on their face. They knew they were caught and there was nothing to do now but whine, kick, and accept your punishment.

Chuckling out loud, knowing all too well that the boy was never going to come willingly, Angor Rot dropped the outstretched claw and started to walk slowly toward the other side of the mattress. He swore the teen squeaked like a mouse, backing far enough into the corner that he actually knocked into the bed stand there. Yet, just when he thought he had the little mageling cornered, there was suddenly a lamp being thrown at his head.

Angor Rot lifted his arm just fast enough to keep the lamp from hitting him in the face, the lamp shattering into porcelain pieces against his forearm. The hunter barely had time to be irritated by this before the youth was actually leaping over his own bed and flipping the whole mattress at the troll.

The assassin was once again caught off guard, the mattress pushing him against the dresser as the teen ran out the doorway. He growled at the sound of fleeing feet as he batted the mattress off.

Shaking his head, shards of porcelain fleeing every which way, Angor Rot started after the whelp calmly. He stalled at the top of the stairs

long enough to see the human rushing for the front door. He didn't even waste a second before he was unsheathing his blade and throwing it down the stairs. The blade barely whizzed past the seer's head before embedding itself in the wood of the door.

Jim stumbled back at that, patting the side of his head for a second before he turned his gaze to the hunter, mouth gaping as he snapped, “You almost turned me into stone!”

Ah, so the little seer knew of his blade's poison: Creeper's Sun. He knew he shouldn't be surprised. Seers were harborers of chaos and troubled times. It wasn't because the seers existed, per se, it was because they used the knowledge they'd obtained to unsettle the nature of things. And this boy seemed to be an awful meddler if the rescue of Kanjigar was any indication.

“Did I?” asked the assassin almost coyly as he lept down the steps, the teen barely jumping out of the way as he landed heavily, “Too bad I missed. It would have been easier to carry you.”

Angor Rot knew how to create the antidote if he did poison the irritating little whelp, so a little nick wouldn't kill him.

Having retreated towards the couch, hand still feeling the left side of his face to make sure he wasn't nicked, Jim glared. He decided he liked Angor Rot a lot more when the troll was trying to kill him as the Trollhunter. This cat-and-mouse game was unbearable and quite simply degrading.

Feeling childish, the teen grabbed a pillow off the couch and threw it at the troll. Said troll took the first pillow to the face like a disgruntled adult, but when the second pillow followed after, Angor Rot acted. He ripped the dagger from the door and sliced the pillow in half like a Fruit Ninja champion, feathers scattering everywhere.

Jim took the feathery distraction for what it was and dashed towards the kitchen instead. He didn't even get within two yards of the back door when there was a portal forming above the door and dropping Angor Rot there like a fallen angel, scattering feathers following in his stead.

Shit, that was right, Angor Rot still had the shadow staff.

Quickly sliding his legs into a guarded stance, Jim pulled his blade out of his sleeve, filling the room with a faint red glow.

Angor Rot whistled at this as if impressed, adding, “And here I thought Trollmarket was trying to keep you from going dark, little seer, but a Blood Mage's blade? I'd say I was impressed … if you even knew how to use it.”

And so, like some kind of weird standoff, the two of them circled each other, Jim in a guarded stance while Angor Rot acted like a cat playing with his food. Jim hated it. He knew there was no way for him to get to the backdoor with the hunter literally circling him. And even then, the assassin had long legs. Plus, the shadow staff. If it had been the day and not the start of the night, maybe he could –

Jim barely had time to intake a breath when suddenly a shadow portal formed under his feet, the youth yipping as he scrambled for any purchase. He grabbed onto the fridge handle hurridly before he could plunge completely into that inky darkness, the youth’s legs disappearing into the hole like lost limbs. He could only look down in horror at his half-gone legs before he tried to drag the other half of his body up. This, unsurprisingly, overbalanced the fridge.

Predictably, Angor Rot took advantage of the teen’s distraction by trying and grab him by the back of his shirt like he had whelp’s scruff. The swinging door, fortunately or unfortunately depending on the party, helped the youth by suddenly flinging him out of the way while raining the contents of the fridge everywhere. The assassin took the brunt of this, frozen foods from the top freezer falling down on him while Jim simultaneously tried to whap the grabbing hand away. The teen even went as far as to grab a jar of falling pickles and smack the troll with it.

The shock, apparently, was enough to draw the hunter back, pickles clinking to the cracks in his toll flesh while Jim hopped away and towards the kitchen sink.

Shaking his arm and head as if trying to disperse the vinegar fluid, the assassin groused, “Someone needs to teach you manners or at least proper battle etiquette, whelp.”

“Then maybe you should learn to knock. Breaking and entering is considered rude by most individuals,” bit back Jim as he looked around desperately for his next weapon. The boy ironically grabbed a frying pan out of the sink and brandished it like a shield.

Angor Rot actually stood there, still dripping pickle juice, almost perplexed. Then, as if finally comprehending how ridiculous this fight

had become, he released a loud guffaw like this was the most amusing thing he had done in centuries … which it probably was, having been imprisoned in a sleeping death for so long.

Personally, seeing Angor Rot laugh at anything, only unnerved Jim further.

Then, as if knowing the teen was unsettled, the assassin headed forward, bringing his shadow staff down like a bo staff. Jim brought up his frying pan to block the attack, the staff banging against the thick iron and creating a reverberation that went through the human's entire body. By the fifth attack, Jim had already figured out what was going on. Angor Rot was wearing him down and numbing his arms to make him easier to disarm and handle.

Knowing that it was crazy to attack, that he didn't even know what his blade could do to troll flesh, Jim took his chances and struck out with his mage's blade. He tried swinging his frying pan first, to catch the troll in the lower chin (had Angor Rot always been so ridiculously tall?) before lashing out with his blade. The troll, unsurprisingly, dodged both attacks. Nonetheless, Jim tried to keep up the attack, striking out as quickly as possible so that he could corner the assassin and get to the back door.

The troll, having hundreds of battles under his belt, caught on as Jim started to back up towards the back door. So, before the teen could even blink, the hunter was falling through a floor portal and was behind him, one of those large arms suddenly wrapping around the teen's neck and dragging him off the ground.

Lake knew immediately that this chokehold was meant to end things and that Angor Rot was done playing. Nonetheless, the teen tried whapping that thick stone flesh with his frying pan, but all it did was irritated the troll more, causing him to tighten his grip.

Choking, the youth's assault with the frying pan ended quickly as he dropped the heavy item, his free hand now trying to pull him up and give him more oxygen. He even tried kicking backward, hoping to get a sweet spot. The hunter merely grunted, his grip sturdy and unyielding. In fact, Jim was starting to see black spots, meaning the chokehold was working, especially when Jim's kicks became more and more uncoordinated.

Feeling desperation kick in, the mageling tried to raise his blood-letting blade to get a good stab or two in the arm choking him, but

before he knew it, a large troll hand was prying the tool from his uncoordinated fingers. His blade even pulsed its red glow mournfully before it was pocketed. The youth knew the fight was done, even as he continued to paw at the arm around his neck. Even Angor Rot seemed to know the end was near, the assassin patting the youth's hair while whispering to just give in.

Hating himself for being weak, for being unable to fight his own battles as he used to, Jim felt his body give in darkness rising to claim him. He still wasn't sure what the assassin wanted with him, but he doubted it was anything good if the troll wanted him alive.

…

Jack felt his shoulders slump as he hung up the phone with Ben, the old rotary chiming slightly as he hung up the receiver.

That poor man should be dwelling on his pending retirement in the next few years … not worrying about getting eaten by changelings. It had become painfully obvious that there was definitely something stalking the other man. Jack could hear how twitchy he was becoming just over the phone. They were defiantly going to have to do something because this was unlikely to go away on its own.

It didn't help that the kids kept begging him for solutions on their chat thing. He still had trouble keeping up with it. He was trying and was probably doing better than Gulager, but technology had left him by the wayside. In fact, the world seemed to have left him behind. He was growing more and more grey, and his joints weren't what they used to be. Yes, he wasn't as old as Gulager, but lately, he had been feeling his age with this whole troll drama … especially with the growing migraines and nightmares.

Sighing as he covered his eyes with his hand, Jack stood there a moment wiling it away before giving up. He needed a bag of vegetables for his head before he started seeing spots … or other *things*. He was sure it was just his paranoia catching up with him, but he swore that there were shadows shifting oddly in the house, following him as if to keep him in their sight.

He knew it was stupid, that his mind was overreacting, and that he just had to update his medication or something.

Opening the fridge's freezer, he moaned in irritation when he found it mostly empty. He forgot that he gave his last bag of frozen peas to that young man, Steve.

Turning his head, he stared at a seemingly innocent door down the hall. It had at least three locks on it. It was the entrance to the basement. He honestly would have never owned a house with a basement himself, for basements merely were harbingers of the dark as far as he was concerned. But this was his parent's home and it was the only home he had ever known, especially after his parents had died and left it to him in his early twenties.

He still felt, to this day, that the changelings or some other force had been involved since they had never found the bodies.

Telling himself that he merely had to turn on the lights, paddle down the old stone steps, and open the freezer, Jack stalled before the basement door. Slowly, as if he was opening a jail cell, the aging man undid each lock with slow calculated movements until they were all undone, the little chains hanging there limply.

Swallowing thickly, Jack grabbed the door handle and ripped it open like he expected to catch some monster at the bottom of the steps … Unsurprisingly, there was nothing.

Sighing, hating that his life had become one paranoid habit after another, Jack flipped the light switch on and quickly descended the stone steps. He really did hate it down here. It was basically an unfinished basement, the house so old that the foundation was made of giant old stones. You could even taste the dirt and the age down there.

It ... reminded him of his time under the bridge, where he had apparently spent two weeks and couldn't remember a thing except for the dark and the smell of dirt and rock.

Shaking off the thought, reminded once more why he hated this bloody place, Jack opened the freezer and stared at it with dissatisfaction. There wasn't much in here that wasn't completely freezer burned. Nonetheless, he reached for an icy bag of questionable contents only to drop it immediately when he heard a gurgling noise. He slammed his back against the freezer chest, the lid slamming shut as he fumbled with his flashlight to try and see where the hungry noise had come from.

Light flickering to life, panic rising in his chest at a horrific rate, the man's light danced over old canning goods as well as dusty trinkets and children's toys that hung from the ceiling. It was a hodgepodge of forgotten things that could easily hide any trespasser! He might have

even rushed up the stairs if his flashlight hadn't flashed past the back corner where it gurgled again.

Oh no … no that. Not now! He couldn't deal with this as high-strung as he was.

Regardless, the man lifted the light up further so he could shine it properly into the back sunken part of the basement … where the sump pump was. Yep, it was full of mirky muddy water and the sump pump, probably done for, gave a weak gurgle, bubbling the top of the water.

Cursing, praying it was just clogged or something because he didn't have the money to replace that right now, Sturges stumbled to the top of the steps to grab his rubber boots and gloves. It wasn't rainy season, thankfully, but one good rain was all it took to flood a basement.

Walking across the raised cement floor, Jack winced as he got near the sunken part of the floor. The water seemed almost black down here in the gloom and he really didn't want to reach into that or step into it for that matter, but that was just the nature of the old house he lived in.

Stepping into the dark water, he wadded towards the pump and stared at the bubbling water in defeat. It was probably done for with that pathetic bubbling. Nonetheless, he placed his flashlight on the cement floor next to him and reached down into that putrid water.

At first, there seemed to be nothing and then his fingers caught on something.

Frowning, he pulled harder and out came long strings of … hair?

What was this? This was not his hair. Certainly not, because it was just so long.

Pulling and pulling, his mind completely on the task at hand and the oddity of it, the man didn't notice the strange fog gathering on the water's surface nor how the water was rippling strangely. He didn't even notice the thin film of frost forming on the water's edges like gathering crystals until he let out a breath and saw the mist in front of his face. Immediately, he knew something was wrong … especially when the basement lights started to flicker. He didn't even have time to glance up at the bulb when he noticed that even his flashlight was rolling away.

Feeling his breath catch, a deep part of him terrified of the dark, he

didn’t even get to rush out of the water when suddenly the hair he had been pulling out of the sump pump was wrapping around his legs like wicked vines. Jack screamed out from the sudden jerk backward, the man falling on his ass into the water. There wasn't even time to start ripping at the grotesque gobs of muddied hair wrapped around his legs before he saw it … an abnormal ripple in the water.

Then, like a specter or some undead thing rising out of the mud, a hand slowly rose from the water. It might have seemed graceful, feminine even, but the nails were just too long, and the skin was nearly dyed black by muddy sludge. This was something sinister and dark breaking into the real world.

Shaking his head, Jack tried to flounder farther away from the rising figure, but the hair wrapped tighter around his legs dragging him down further into the murky depths. The man choked on his scream as he nearly ended up chin-deep in the murky depths.

Seemingly careless of the man’s struggle, the rising figure’s head was now crowning the water, the top of her head rising and revealing some kind of muddied crown and veil that hid her face. She looked like some kind of long-lost drowned queen as she rose slowly to the surface of the water, her features hidden and stained in mud. It wasn’t until she was fully situated atop the water, the base of her dress still waterlogged, that she seemed to move.

Her fingers twitched first. They popped and cracked like a corpse forcibly moved long after rigor mortis had set in. Her neck even seemed to snap oddly as if she couldn’t control her movements or her internal bones were broken. Then, seemingly recognizing she had company, the muddy form tilted her head down at Jack. For a moment, she just seemed to stare at him, fingers and arms curled up oddly like a gnarled tree.

And that was all there was for a moment, the sound of dripping water and Jack's frantic breathing filling the space.

Then, grotesquely, there was a new popping sound. The veil on the figure's face was moving, revealing that the sunken woman’s jaw was opening. It just kept popping, getting wider and wider until it was gaping maw. Finally, at this, she seemed to speak … even though her jaw never moved. The sound that escaped her was instantly odd, distant even, as it seemed to skip like an old vinyl record set to play.

It was a whisper at first, barely legible over the skipping noise, but the

volume seemed to multiple like whispers on top of whispers, like locusts gathering for a feast, "… f*r*Ray... mmM**m**mm***m* ...**"

Jack, sitting there in the water, his breath coming out in panicked gasps could only stare in horror, unable to respond.

The figure cracked her neck once more, stating again, "rr*rr**R***-ee-e*e***E**. MmM*M*m."

Despite himself, despite the gathered pain building in the back of his skull and the numbness dragging up his limps, Jack slowly shook his head. He did not understand.

Still for a second, a choking sound escaped the drowned figure like she was trying to regain the use of her tongue, and she tried again, "**F**-f-fr*ee* … m-M-me."

It was then like a bomb went off in Jack's head, the man instantly wailing like his skull was being cleaved in two. His screams could have peeled paint as he thrashed there in the water, possessed by the watery woman's words. And yet … not one person heard Jack Sturge's screams.

That poor man was trapped down there in the dark … like he had once been so long ago.

Chapter End Notes

> Shit guys, I didn't expect such a wonderful reception after such a long hiatus. Thanks for the support and inspiration. Thus, you get a new chapter so quickly. :3
>
> Also, I totally feel that Angor Rot is walking around with the equivalent of open wounds because he's cutting pieces of himself off, which just increases his creep factor and might even thrust him into the undead category? I mean, he doesn't even have a soul in his body.
>
> Furthermore, I realized I hadn't done anything with the Milk Carton Epidemic subplot for a few chapters. Soooo, I needed to get back to that. It's not exactly an open and closed case … and it now has significantly more horror to it than even I originally intended. XD

Spell Trap

Chapter Notes

Proofread is lazy. I'm going to bed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A soft whispering filled Jim's ears and there was a flickering of light just behind his eyelids. His amulet was reaching out to him, his magic bidding and willing him awake. The teen didn't even want to open his eyes, he didn't even want to acknowledge the pounding in his head, but he could feel his magic singing up at him, bidding him to move, to open his eyes, *to do something*!

He almost sunk back under into the calming darkness and its blissful ignorance, the blue flicker too far away to really do anything, when there was suddenly a red spark. Then there was a harsh stinging in his hand where his Blood Mage's blade had tasted his blood and stitched him back up.

The teen hissed in pain sitting up with a flinch as he pulled his arm into his chest, his hand becoming a fist as he tried to will the burning pain away.

Gritting his teeth, his vision still blurry, Jim blinked groggily as he tried to observe his surroundings. He … was on the floor … in his house … in the middle of the living room? Wait? Why?

Brain still catching up, the teen stared at a strange painted line on the floor before him. Had he done that? No, no. He hadn't had any recent art projects and mom hadn't painted in ages. In fact, what was he doing at home? Wasn't he bound to Trollmarket? No, wait! He had escaped and *finally got home*. That's right! He finally made his way home after a few weeks of being stuck in Trollmarket and … mom wasn't there … Angor Rot was there instead.

Sitting up straight in a panic, forgetting the pain in his hand, the teen was halfway to his feet and ready to sprint out of the house when suddenly a large hand grabbed him from behind by the ankle, yanking him back down. Jim's bark of surprise was cut short as his chin slammed down onto the wood floor, the teen biting the inside of his mouth slightly. The rush of blood in his mouth was the least of his problems though as the youth kicked his leg free and backpaddled

away from his capturer.

Unsurprisingly, Angor Rot had been right behind him the whole time, sitting there on the floor with his back against the couch, rifling through Jim's bag and the whole house from the look of it with the odd collection of things sitting around him.

Waggling his pointer finger as if chiding a child, Angor Rot stated simply, "You won't move from that arcane circle if you know what's good for you, little seer."

Wiping a dribble of blood from the side of his mouth, Jim's eyes flickered around him, the direness of the situation hit him. That wasn't just paint on the floor. It was lines upon lines dancing in a complicated overlapping network to form an arcane spell that Jim was situated inside of, candles and glow stones encircling the edges just to illuminate how fucked he was.

Taking a deep breath, telling himself not to freak out because that wasn't going to get him anywhere, the teen decided that maybe speaking with his capturer would get him farther than a fight. It also might buy him some time to get out of this. Vendel had started teaching him the basics about arcane circles and summoning lines after all. This kind of reminded him of the binding circle from his last life, but none of those yellow stones were about. Plus, the lines and symbols were all wrong and way above his current training. It pained him to admit, but Angor Rot was a skilled mage in his own right. He even, technically, had a staff already.

Patting his chest to see if his amulet was still there, Jim's heart sank. It was gone. Not too surprising. He would have been more surprised if Angor Rot hadn't completely disarmed an opponent.

Eyes wandering around as he tried to see where his amulet was being held, the teen swallowed before asking, "Why are we still at my house? What do you want with me? Or should I say, what does Stricklander want with me? I know he has the Inferna Copula and that you … have to do as you're told."

The glare that Jim received from the troll could have melted metal, but it didn't stall the troll as he rummage through a bag ... Jim's bag from Trollmarket specifically. And, there, right next to his bag and strangely the only living aloe vera plant in the house, was his amulet. It seemed to flicker weekly as if calling out to Jim.

Promising he'd snatch it as soon as he could, the teen acted like he

was getting into a more comfortable position, stretching out his leg. He was hoping to test the edge of the circle with his shoe. If he was lucky, nothing would happen, and he would take the chance to sprint away and grab his amulet as he went. And if he was unlucky, maybe he would get electrocuted or activate a barrier or something. Nonetheless, trying to move slow enough that Angor Rot didn't notice his casual stretch, he added, "I could help you if you just asked. We don't have to fight. I could even get the ring from Strickler."

He secretly wanted to add that he had done it before ... even if it had ended badly for one or two parties.

That caused the troll to stall in his rummaging, the hunter's expression flat like he didn't believe a word out of the boy's mouth, "So that I could belong to you instead? A mageling a few spells away from becoming a Blood Mage? Call me *unconvinced*."

Jim twitched at that, the boy feeling like he had been slapped as he wipe blood from the edge of his mouth again. Despite himself, his pride stinging, the teen groused, "It was just for the cutting enchantment. I needed the blade to go home."

"And I just wanted to save my village," said the troll almost bitterly adding as he continued to sort the odd collection of things around him. "One step in the wrong direction is all it takes."

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the hunter then slammed his dagger down into the wooden floor not far from Jim's foot, the troll grousing, "And I see your foot growing ever closer to the edge of that spell circle. Continue if you wish to lose a toe."

Glaring at the troll, Jim pulled his foot back. He then adjusted the way he was sitting, his pinky hopefully hidden by the mass of his legs as he crept his left hand toward the edge of the arcane circle behind him.

The troll glared for a minute more before he finally fished the skull cap out of Jim's bag. He tilted it around as if assessing the thing's value. Then, with little grace, he dropped it in front of him like a cauldron. He then started opening pockets on his belt, throwing an oddity of herbs and objects in as he muttered to himself.

Watching for a moment, Jim glanced around a bit more covertly. Ah, there was his Blood Mage's blade next to his remaining grave sand and alignment stones. Just when he was dwelling on if he should try to get his blade back as well when he fled, the teen jumped slightly as the troll started grinding away at his concoction with a pestle, little sparks

of red and yellow flaring up at the edges of the skull cap as if the troll was griding down fireworks.

Staring at Angor Rot's pilfered things, part of him not wanting to know what the troll was up to, Jim tried to think of the right thing to say. Instead, his teen brain blurted out the first thing it could think of, “You know it's rude to go through someone else’s stuff.”

Angor Rot didn't even stop stirring, he just raised a brow before chuckling, “Who are you to shame me, mageling? I'm not the one with a skull cap and grave sand in my satchel. Though, I am glad you brought one to the surface. I've been needing a new skull cap, and it’s such a chore to scoop the innards out before the body completely turns to stone.”

Jim could only lean back slightly in disgust. He hadn't really thought about where the skull cap had come from or how it was made, but now he had a very vivid image he didn't really need.

Shaking off that thought and Angor Rot's attempt to shame him for owning 'dark mage' goods, more than aware that Angor Rot was still messing with him, the teen watched the assassin working for a moment as he tried to think of a way out of this. Strategy was more Claire's thing but if he could just buy enough time, there was a possibility he could just luck his way out. Toby and he really did luck their way out of more things than he’d like to admit.

Trying to get some answers, Jim allowed his fingers to creep to the edge of his circle. “Are you going to answer any of my first questions? Like why are you here capturing me instead of trying to kill the Trollhunter? Certainly, that's more useful to Strickler than some random teenager that can guess real good and sometimes make books float.”

Angor Rot snorted at this as if Jim had just said a joke, the troll stalling in his work to meet the human's gaze, “Do you know nothing of your breed, child? Not only are wars started over lesser types of foretellers, but young magelings like yourself *bleed* magic into the area around them. Long lost magics are revived and fortune can be brought to the denizens caring for such a being … unless the mage goes dark that is. Then, a mageling will be nothing more than a curse.”

Shifting uncomfortably in the arcane circle, his fingertips seeming to get hot as he started to push them over the lines, Jim wondered if he could scratch off the paint and disrupt the thing, “Oh … I hadn't

gotten to that lesson yet."

An awkward silence hung there for a moment, the assassin going back to his work as Jim start to try and quietly claw at the painted line, "So, is that what Strickler wants me for? To be a magic battery?"

"And for your foresight abilities as well, I'd wager," said Angor Rot simply, before he stopped grinding and picked up his blade instead.

"I thought no one could force me to reveal my premonitions," said Jim carefully as he watched Angor Rot mess with his blade. The strange conversation he was having with Angor Rot was kind of surreal, but he still didn't trust the troll as far as he could throw him.

"One cannot, little seer, without inviting false premonitions," said Angor Rot as he started to oddly tap his blade on his forearm. "But Strickler seems the patient sort while you are anything but."

Slightly insulted, whatever thoughts Jim had next were completely scattered when suddenly there was a flare of golden light behind him, the arcane circle apparently having enough of Jim's prying as it lashed out. The teen yipped and snatched his hand back, wincing as he looked at the slightly blackened tips. That was definitely going to blister.

Hissing as he cradled his hand, scooting away from the edges slightly, Jim threw a genuine glare at the troll when Angor Rot chuckled at him. The troll then shook his head at the boy's murderous glare, adding, "I had warned you, seer, not to touch the edges, but that also tells me that this cannot wait. I will not have my freedom sprint away under the guise of a temperamental whelp. I know it will take much more than a boundary bracelet to keep you."

At that, Jim's stomach already sinking at the troll's odd words, he watched as the troll suddenly cut into himself, peeling away some of his top flesh until it came off in a small chunk. Then, seemingly unbothered by his own wound, the troll dropped the piece of stone-flesh into the skull cap bowl and went back to grinding, little sparks of yellow and magenta magic now spurting like wayward firecrackers.

Sitting there, hand still cupped near his chest, Jim frowned deeply. Not only had Angor Rot's words been foreboding, but watching the troll cut into himself was downright disturbing. He had recalled something about a flesh sacrifice from the Blood Mage book. Those kinds of spells could easily backfire for the unskilled. Yet, one of the most disturbing parts was that Angor Rot wasn't even notably in pain.

Stone-flesh was still *alive* after all and still had pain receptors. In fact, the hunter wasn't even bleeding after cutting into himself. Trolls don't bleed much the way it was, but they consumed flesh and organic goods for a reason. Having learned basic troll healing from Vendel had taught him that much. So how was Angor Rot just chipping away at himself and not bleeding? In fact, there were just chunks of him missing here and there … was he even alive?

Can anything truly be alive when it doesn't have a soul?

Looking down at his hand, hating the pain but glad for it at the same time, Jim wondered if Angor Rot felt much of anything. Was he stuck in an undead-unalive purgatory? Could he even eat? Sleep? Did he feel the warmth of a night breeze or the cool crispness of a midnight rain? Just what did it entail when one did not have possession of their own soul?

Suddenly pitying the troll, part of him recalled how past-life Angor Rot had pleaded for his soul to be returned. Jim had instead watched as the troll's soul had been destroyed.

Unable to stop himself, Jim found himself speaking softly like he was dealing with a crippled animal, "Does it hurt to exist without your soul?"

The enraged look that slowly took over the hunter's face almost made Jim regret his words, the troll's own voice almost a growl as he responded, "I do not need your pity, mageling. Soon, the only one that will need pity here is you."

Frowning at that, unable to chase away the nature of a hero's heart, Jim added, "Sorry for feeling empathy, but it's just that I'd think that'd hurt … or do you not feel anything at all?"

The way Angor Rot's fingers twitched spoke volumes. It didn't quiet the troll's tongue for long though.

"It hurts less so than the gaping wound of a lacking soul," growled out the hunter finally before he poured some dark liquid in and grabbed a stirring tool, little golden and magenta sparks spitting everywhere and threatening to start the floor on fire as he stirred vehemently. Jim had obviously pinched a nerve. It was now painfully obvious how very little Jim knew about the hunter and yet past-him hadn't found him worth helping. He had turned down the plea of a *slave*.

Jim winced at that thought, his guilt ten folding for not answering

Angor Rot's call … especially when he recalled the troll's madness when his soul's container had been destroyed. It had driven the assassin to madness.

Rubbing the back of his neck, feeling really heavy all of a sudden, Jim found himself asking, “Why don't you just ask the Trollhunter for help? They can't deny a real call and being basically enslaved by the Pale Lady and forced to do other people’s bidding kind of sounds like something they would help with.”

Yep, he couldn't believe he just pushed that responsibility onto Kanjigar. Just another case against Jim being the Trollhunter to begin with.

The troll stopped stirring his potion and looked at Jim as if he was mad, almost in awe as he added, “Seers really do set out to get themselves killed, don’t they? Spouting madness like that. Your kind should all be de-tongued for your own safety.”

Jim's face scrunched up in insult, but Angor Rot just continued as he rose to his feet, stating, “The evening grows old and darker still, child. It’s best to get this over with before other night creatures besides myself notice your presence above ground and far from the Hearthstone’s light. So, seer, do you want the mark on your back or chest? I will allow you that much choice since soon you will unlikely have any at all.”

Eyes going wide, Jim was to his feet and trying to gather magic in his hand before Angor Rot was even over the threshold of the arcane circle. It was a pathetic glow compared to how his magic usually burst to life when he had his amulet on, but he was still surprised that it came at his call. It wasn’t strong enough to form a sword or something useful, but Jim still managed to encase his hand in a magic sheen and make a fist with it. He didn’t have a spell or the right words for what he wanted, but he hoped the intent was enough. He then threw an uppercut at that stone chin as the troll drew near.

The assassin dodged elegantly to ignore the hit, but even Jim saw his wince as little arches of electricity jumped onto the troll’s flesh and seemed to bite into him before sinking in.

Wiping his cheek with his spare hand, seemingly having felt pain from Jim’s magic, the troll glared, his words echoing, “Impressive, little mage. Perhaps if you would have used your base magic instead of that blood blade, you might have managed to get away. Not for long, mind

you, but no one ever escapes me for long."

The scuffle didn't last long given the enclosed space and Jim's lack of gathered magic, but Angor Rot didn't seem to mind. He actually played with Jim, parrying each electric jab with his hand as if happy for the thrill of pain as the blue magic arched over his stone skin with each impact. He might have even allowed it to go on for hours with the rancor grin he held, but Jim soon found his magic failing and running short. He didn't have his amulet after all, and soon Jim was pinned to the floor with a knee on one shoulder.

"You're going to crush me!" Jim snapped, his free arm clawing at the floor fruitlessly. "Humans need air!"

"You seem to be getting enough if you can yell," replied the troll almost cheekily. It really bothered Jim how differently the troll treated him as the seer. It likely had something to do with how Kanjigar and the rest of Trollmarket treated him as well. He was a mageling: a child of magic.

He wasn't a child! He was a teenager!

And with that rage filled thought, Jim slapped his free hand back and hit Angor Rot with all the magic he had left. The troll shouted in surprise, the attack likely stinging, but it was Jim that paid the price, his arm painfully pinned and his face pushed into the floor.

"Enough," finally growled Angor Rot, Jim finally making him angry it seemed, "I haven't time for games anymore. This will be done now and quickly."

And with that, Jim felt the back of his jacket being tugged and shredded, the troll quickly poking around at the skin of his back left shoulder, muttering something to himself. Then, oddly enough, Angor Rot released his head and offered up a wooden spoon, stating simply, "Bite into this. I know how frail human teeth are and how easily a human can bite out their own tongue. And for this spell to work, I need you alive as long as possible."

Turning his head away, Jim hated that Vendel was ultimately right. Not only was Jim receiving some kind of cursed mark but he was recaptured.

Beside himself, finally feeling defeated, moisture started to gather in his eyes. The teen's words were almost a whisper, "Please, you don't have to do whatever this is. I promise I will try to help you."

“I trust mages less so than the Trollhunter, child,” said Angor Rot surprisingly softly. “Now bite and this will be over quickly.”

Hating himself, somehow feeling this was divine punishment for ignoring Angor Rot’s call in his last life, Jim bit his lip and buried his face into the floor, ignoring the wooden spoon. The hunter muttered something about the stubbornness of magelings and started dipping his claws into the strange inky concoction in the bowl, showing that Jim was out of time.

The boy refused to cry out when he felt those same claws finally start to dig into the flesh of his back, his chest feeling like it was fire as the troll started to carve his cursed symbol, the air filling with magic.

…

Sergeant Ben Gulager sat at this desk, staring at the report before him blankly. He didn’t want to finish typing it … he really didn’t because he was a man that had always tried to uphold his principles and here he was about to lie on another report. Yes, *another*. He had already lied about the troll that basically scrapped his car on the bridge the other night. He had said it had been dark. Maybe it was a bear or some prank that had gone completely wrong, but it seemed that the lie had been presented a day short and a penny late … something was already after him.

He could feel it sometimes when he was out on the street, serving the public. It was like he was being watched. At first, he blamed the kids and Jack for imbuing paranoia in him. He wouldn’t even stand near culverts or sewer openings anymore because apparently trolls and such creatures dwelled there. Haters of the light apparently. And at first, he thought it odd that he was getting call after call to end up in such places. Places that were dark, out of the way, and secluded.

And then today, that FBI agent that claimed to be sticking around to further investigate Jim Lake Junior's disappearance, smiled at him. It was not a friendly smile. It was … cold … and hungry … and *wrong*. And for the briefest of seconds, he was certain he had seen that man's eyes glint like that of a wild animal.

His hands had shaken when he called Jack about it a few hours ago. The younger man had been surprisingly calm, stating he knew what to do, and that he would help him. They just needed to test this FBI agent, make sure he was a monster, and then move on from there. Jack said he’d call back in a little bit, still muttering something about

horseshoes and iron bear traps.

Ben didn't know what to think about that, but Jack was a little touched in the head. He never developed socially right after losing his brother. It was like something was stuck in the man's head, always haunting him.

Wiping a hand down his face, wondering if it was too late in the night to go check on Jack since the man hadn't gotten back to him yet as promised, Ben perked up as one of the call operators echoed over his and everyone else's radios in the small station.

"Hey, who's free to go speak with some joggers over in West Arcadia Park?" said dispatch tiredly. "It sounded like another false sighting of that missing kid, Lake, but some of the details are fishy. For one, he was filthy and seemed to be running from someone. And from what the joggers could tell, he was heading towards the culva sac where the Lake's house is located."

Ben, more than glad to ignore his report, was quick to volunteer along with a few younger officers. It wasn't that he was hopeful if it was actually Jim, he was honestly terrified if it was. Because, according to Tobias, that dark troll from the bridge, Bular, was out for blood when it came to Jim. And, fearing for his own life nowadays, Ben wasn't sure how much he'd be able to help the poor kid.

…

Jim's nails dug into the wooden floor as the boy ground his teeth, trying not to even whimper as Angor Rot literally carved some kind of symbol into his skin. He had no idea what it was or what it was for, but if the assassin was involved it couldn't be good.

Finally, after what felt like ten consecutive minutes of having his flesh parted and feeling blood pooling down his back, the troll stopped muttering above him and pulled his claws away. Unable to stop himself, Jim completely collapsed onto the floor, tears blinding him. He couldn't believe he had pitied this monster just a few minutes ago.

"Humans really do bleed too much," muttered Angor Rot above the teen, before he lifted his knee off the youth's back and reached for a towel from his collection of pilfered goods.

Jim didn't even get to gather a deep breath when suddenly there was cool water being dumped on his back, the troll immediately patting away the blood with the towel. The mage-in-training might have

thought the act a small kindness if the troll did grumble about twitchy mortals and went back to carving into the youth's back, apparently making some final touches.

“P-please stop,” finally whimpered Jim, hating how his voice broke with each word as the troll made his final corrections. “I said I would h-help you, so why are y-you doing this to m-me? And w-what are you doing to me?”

“Shifting someone's gaze,” said Angor Rot cryptically as he dabbed Jim's back once more making the teen hiss. “And taking the power I need instead of begging for it like a fool.”

Then, reaching for his own blade, the assassin lifted his hand over the skull cap cutting into himself as he started rehearsing an actual spell. This time his wound actually seemed to bleed, droplets of troll blood falling into the bowl as an unnatural wind started to form in the room, the candles that hadn't melted completely down to their wicks flickering.

Jim tried to translate the words, tried to understand what the assassin was cursing him with in old Trollish, but the heat in his chest was growing tenfold like his skin was on fire. Then, apparently done with the spoken part of his spell, the hunter poured the remaining concoction all over the carved symbol on Jim's back. The teen didn't even get to yip at the feel of the black goo when Angor Rot started pressing his cut hand over the bleeding symbol.

Electricity immediately seemed to ripple forth, blue electric arcs pouring out of Jim's wound and seeming to snap at the golden electricity coming out of Angor Rot's own wound. It was like two thunderstorms had suddenly met, biting and ripping at each other, each trying to devour the other. It might have been a real battle, a competition of magics, but soon the arcane circle was glowing, seeming to absorb both beings' magic.

And yet … there were plans besides Angor Rot's blooming forth, more than happy to throw a wrench into the predicament.

Jim, seemingly unable to take the pain anymore, was suddenly withering below his capturer, barking about the heat ... and the fire. And yet, just when Angor Rot was about to bark at the boy to be still, that there was no fire, there were purple flames there. They were crawling up from under the teen's shirt and up the human's back … and to the two intersecting wounds.

Before Angor Rot could try and halt the spell, to pull away or react appropriately, a third magic-type had intercepted. The purple flames immediately overwhelmed the original spell, causing it to implode in on itself and backfire.

The hunter was violently ripped from his spell work and thrown across the room while Jim was tossed a little less harshly against a nearby wall and right out of the arcane circle.

Jim was the first to recover as magic rippled and faded in the air, the teen wheezing as he patted at the purple flames under his shirt. He soon was ripping some kind of scroll from under his jacket, the thing bursting into flames as soon as it was away from the boy's flesh. The teen didn't even get to see if he had been burned by the Bargainer's scroll or even wonder why it had activated now of all times when Angor Rot was speaking.

“What spell trap have you cast, you little fool,” barked the troll shakily, traces of purple and blue magic jumping over his stone-flesh as he hunched over himself in the ruins of the Lake's coffee table and couch. He was obviously in some kind of pain, the troll's cut hand being gripped tightly at the wrist. It seemed like the spell had rebound on its caster with the way Angor Rot was now bleeding from his wound, a blue arcane circle now etched there in his palm.

Pushing himself into a sitting position, a hand on his chest, Jim merely panted before stating, “I don't know. I didn't do anything.”

That didn't seem to be a good enough answer for the troll though. And, despite his obvious pain, Angor Rot shakily lifted himself out of the ruins of the couch and headed towards the breathless boy across the room, the troll's killer intent obvious.

Jim, uncertain if Strickler's command was going to keep him alive or not after that spectacular backfire, panicked as he tried to get to his feet. He needed to get his amulet and get out of here!

And yet, just when the assassin was two strides from grabbing Jim, there was a bang and crash, the whole house seeming to shake. The back door to the house had literally been kicked in and was now sliding across the floor. The teen didn't even get to blink properly when suddenly the room was filled with the soft magical glow of spelled armor, a troll's roar filling the room. None other than Kanjigar was now in the fray and kicking the assassin away from the mageling, the Trollhunter roaring at Angor Rot to stay away from his charge.

The human might have taken a second to be amazed or even impressed with Kanjigar's explosive entrance, if the cry of police sirens hadn't soon joined the troll battle forming in the middle of the living room, red and blue lights flashing almost as brightly as Daylight as the Trollhunter tried to slice the assassin down.

...

Across town, far from the ensuing troll-battle forming in the Lake house as it was surrounded by cop cars, was a sleeping nearly-immortal nineteen-year-old. His name was Douxie Casperan.

Currently, he was camped out in the back room of his place of work on a cot. You might think that the business owner might frown at that … if they knew it was there to being with. A spare spell here and there, and no one saw a thing. It was perfect for a wayward wizard-in-training that had yet to find their place in the world and create their first staff.

In fact, Douxie had been searching for a long time for a way to complete himself, but there was just something missing in him. It was like a word had been unspoken and a spell had only been partially cast, leaving him in this place of limbo: a mage that may never become a full wizard.

And yet, if that was what Casperan dreamed of or not, it matter little because suddenly there was a cat-familiar jumping on the young man's chest, batting at his cheeks as he pestered him to get up.

Turning away from Archie's paws, Douxie groaned and rolled over, wanting to go back to bed. And yet, unsurprisingly his pillow fell to the floor and his only blanket escaped, leaving the mage lying there on a cold cot.

Sighing, knowing that that was a sign to get up, the wizard-in-training slowly sat up, hair escaping every which way as he gave a tired glare at his companion.

His muttering was barely audible as he rubbed a hand down his face, “Why Archie? Some of us have to actually work around here and need to get some sleep for the next day.”

Archie, now sitting on a desk piled with books and other magical oddities, flicked his tail as he muttered, “Well, you might have to call in tomorrow because we have a situation on our hands. It seems that oddity has finally shown itself. In fact, it seems to have waken the

other as well."

Frowning deeply, not liking the sound of that at all, the young man rolled off of his cot and padded with bare feet over to the desk he had pushed into the back corner with him. Said desk was piled with magic oddities, spell books, and crystal vials. All the things a mage-in-training needs to become a full-fledged wizard. And yet, there was one curio that stood out from the rest. It was an old Landlord's board game that looked like it came from the early 1900s, the greens and blues seeming painfully faded with the bright little crystals placed all over it. In fact, a few of the little stones were glowing, flickering like ghost lights.

Douxie, swallowing sharply, asked calmly, "It's back, isn't it?"

"The one that took the children," clarified the familiar as he poked at a small crystal with a claw, the thing flickering a sickly yellow.

"And the oddity as well has finally shown itself," added Douxie as he squatted before the desk, getting eye-level with the crystal figures, especially the one that was flickering a soft blue. "And there is no doubt in my mind that chaos will follow in its wake. It doesn't belong here."

"That doesn't stop it from being here regardless," said the cat as he jumped down the floor, stating simply, "Now, come along. We have an enigma to investigate. It was Merlin's last command to you after all."

Watching another little crystal flicker to life on the board, part of him feeling like this was all some kind of greater domino effect, the mage muttered, "Yeah, this mystery has drug itself out long enough, hasn't it? It's time for this to be put to rest."

And with that, the immortal young man slid on his boots, ready to see what all the fuss was about.

Chapter End Notes

> There, I finally brought Douxie up … and I have no idea how to write him. I need to rewatch Wizards or something.
>
> And yes, Jim finally got that troll tattoo he wanted back in season one. I'm sure it's super badass and totally not cursed. XD

Embracing Figures

Chapter Notes

> Why do I always torture myself by proofreading in the middle of the night? ಠ_ಠ

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Angor Rot grunted as he was kicked in the stomach by the Trollhunter, flying back into the front door and nearly causing the door to fly off the hinges. The assassin growled, gritting his teeth when he felt actual raw *pain* run up his spine. He barely got to dwell on the feeling before he dodged Daylight's next swipe, the Trollhunter slicing a thick line through the door and allowing more flickering blue and red light in.

This Trollhunter was obviously all business and very angry that the mageling had been snatched.

Rolling to his feet, his eyes quickly searching for his staff and blade, Angor Rot dodged another swipe from the Trollhunter before chuckling, "Ahh, the Trollhunter. I was looking forward to our meeting … Generally, it is more in my favor upon our introduction, but I cannot complain about the change of decorum for it shall make you more memorable than the last few Trollhunters I have felled."

At that comment and the assassin's dark grin, Kanjigar felt his rage bubble to the surface. He generally wasn't the type to fall prey to his temper, it was probably one of the reasons he was a long-lived Trollhunter, but the thought of the missing souls from the Void Between Worlds was enough to make his blood boil.

Kanjigar roared, making the glass panes on the first-floor shake before he threw a punch at his opponent, driving the leaner troll farther away from the mageling curled up against the wall.

Jim, curled up against the wall, tried to breathe through the pain as small traces of magic continued to ripple over his form. He tried to focus on the fight so he'd know when to move. Right now Kanjigar was trying to keep his weaponless opponent off-balance. And though that seemed to be a logical move, Angor Rot kept dodging back and rolling towards the destroyed couch in the living room … where all of his weapons and supplies lay half buried in debris.

Pushing back the pain, uncurling so he could get some more air in his lungs, the mageling barked out, “D-don’t let him near the couch! H-his staff and blade are there!”

Said assassin had enough time to glare at Jim and his outburst before Kanigar and surprisingly now Draal tried to press him away from the rubble. In fact, the hunter was quickly forced to use hand-to-hand combat and any random household items he could grab as he was two-teamed. The brawl was even starting to make its way up the stairs, the human wincing as he listened to the destruction above his head. There wasn’t going to be an upstairs left from the sound of it, especially with how the light fixtures were shaking on the ground floor.

Wincing at the sound of someone getting kicked or shoved into a wall upstairs, the human nearly screamed when a cool hand was placed on his shoulder.

Luckily … it was only Blinky, the historian quickly kneeling next to him and whispering, “Young Jim, thank Deya we found you! Are you alright? You seem injured.”

Wincing as something crashed upstairs, Jim allowed the blue troll to push him up into a better sitting position. Unsurprisingly, the trainer's fingers kept getting zapped by the last traces of the magical backlash, yet the trainer still searched for any obvious injuries.

Beside himself, still listening to Blinky's soft murmurs that everything was okay now, Jim suddenly felt overcome. It was like he was five years old again, hurting, but this time … his father figure came back.

Feeling a sob gathering in his throat, Jim leaned forward and buried his head into Blinky's form, the cool stone flesh against his brow offering a grounding effect as a realization hit him. Vendel and the rest of the trolls were right. He was just some dumb kid running around thinking he had cheat codes while ultimately trying to get himself killed.

Why couldn't he do anything right?!

Hiccupping, hating how useless he felt in this new life, Jim sobbed into the trainer’s shoulder, “I-I’m such an idiot. I thought I-I would be f-fine, that I could fight m-my own battles, like someone like A-angor Rot wouldn't be interested in me, b-but I was wrong. I-I'm always wrong! Vendel was r-right, I'm going to end up d-dead soon.”

Surprised by the teen's admittance, Blinky threw a look at Aaarrrggghhh as the troll finished popping his joints so he could get into the doorway. The large green troll shrugged his shoulders, obviously unsure how to respond to that. Jim really did act like he was trying to get himself killed.

Unable to think of a response, Blinky moved to rub the teen on the back instead. To at least offer a small show of comfort before ushering him out of the house. This lasted for all of two seconds before the teen hissed in pain, the troll pulling back his hand. The historian was instantly horrified when he noticed that there was something wet on his digits … His fingers were covered in blood.

"Great Gronka Morka, you're bleeding," said the advisor as he had the teen lean forward so he could have a look. He took in a deep breath, his shock evident as he took in the hand-sized wound on the back of Jim's left shoulder.

Aaarrrgghh, who was now at the bottom of the steps as if guarding them to see if friend or foe was going to come down first, snorted out a huff of air before asking, "It bad? Smell blood."

"I cannot tell. Grab me a piece of cloth, old friend. Quickly," said the trainer as he tried to peel away the shredded fabric of Jim's shirt. He almost bulked when he was immediately offered a *whole curtain*.

For a moment, Blinky stared at the fabric before tilting his gaze to the window that faced the front of the house. It was completely uncovered now and allowed the police lights to flicker inside.

"Aaarrrgghh, though I am thankful for any assistance," said the librarian almost calmly before adding in an exasperation tone, "that curtain was the only thing to keeping us hidden from all of humanity!"

The large troll, seemingly surprised, looked over his shoulder at the police lights now flickering into the room. "Oh, sorry. I fix."

Then, before Blinky could freak out more, what remained of the couch was piled in front of the curtainless window. Aaarrrgghh even seemed to take the initiative and started closing all the curtains in the house.

…

Meanwhile, outside the Lake residence, the three cops that had gone to check on the possible sighting of James Lake Jr., stood there

watching the very shutters of the Lake house shake. The crashing sounded like walls were about to be blown out and floors were being punched in. None of them missed the hulky shadow and glinting eyes of something on the first floor as a curtain was ripped from the window. All their guns quickly became unholstered at that point, especially when the huge figure returned and covered said window with a … couch?

The two younger men looked at Ben, being that he was the oldest officer there and had seen some shit. None of them wanted to get closer to the house as they heard a deafening roar come from inside.

“Do you … do you think it’s a bear or something? They saw a bear the other day when searching in the woods, right?” asked one of the younger officers, Ivan Staab, as he adjusted his pistol nervously.

Michael Rexford, Ivan’s partner, looked at him incredulously as he reached for the shotgun in the front of the cruiser. He then started adding shotgun shells before adding in a dry tone, “Then it has to be a pack of bears with all that racket. All I know is that I’m not going in there without backup … Well, more backup than the newbie and the retiree.”

Gulager glared at the *retiree* comment while Staab stated, “Sleuth. It’s called a Sleuth of bears. Plus, there was that moose sighting. Maybe a moose got in. There's a whole bunch of food on the front step.”

Rexford gave a dry glare to his partner before adding sarcastically, “Yeah, *meese*. It’s probably just ravenous *meese*. So, you wanna call a game warden and normal backup, smartass? Maybe we should get a whole *sleuth* of people out here for the show? Perhaps even that FBI guy who's been loafing about doing nothing. Either way, animals don't close curtains.”

Staab wilted slightly, grumbling softly, “It's *moose,* jerk.”

Gulgar might have considered the whole argument hilarious if every hair on his body wasn't standing on end as the two younger officers bickered next to him. That … had to have been a troll in the window. No doubt about it. The eyes glinted just like that Bullar fella from the bridge. He'd never forget that hungry look or the shine of those monstrous eyes. If anything, this one was even bigger.

Yes, he knew that all trolls weren't complete *ass-pants* and *human-tasters*, according to Tobias, but he wasn't willing to test the theory with the two younger officers' lives … especially since changeling's

were also a troll-thing that were likely after him. This could all be a trap.

So, deciding to err on the side of caution, Gulager stated, “Quit bickering about what it is then and get some bodies on the CB. Yes, human eyes don't glint like that so … maybe it is a bear. Either way, call for backup. And see if we can get Mrs. Lake on the phone. Let's make sure she's not at home before we just stand out here like a *sleuth* of fools.”

Rexford gave him a thousand-mile stare, obviously ill-amused, but grabbed the CB regardless.

…

Sighing as the flickering lights faded into the background, Blinky balled up the curtain and started dabbing the wound. He knew that they didn't have much time before the human enforcers started kicking down the door or something, but he had to make sure Jim was okay first. He quickly noted that the wound was caked in some kind of odd sticky fluid which seemed to help with the bleeding, and at least it didn't seem very deep. The problem though was that the injury wasn't just a normal injury. It was a carved sigil, commonly known as a cursed mark.

Blinky signed again, dabbed the wound another two times before he balled up the curtain and pressed it against the wound. He helped Jim sit up before stating softly, “It's a cursed mark, Young Jim. No doubt about it. I'm having trouble reading what it's supposed to do because of the blood and black rubbish in it, but we'll get you to Vendel post-haste. Perhaps there is something that he can do since it's still fresh.”

Jim, sitting up, already figured as much. Yet, before he could open his mouth and ask about the magical backlash, there was a bark of pain upstairs followed by a crash of glass. Then, right at the window Aaarrrggghhh was about to close, a flash of blue flopped. It was Draal, and he had been pushed out of an upstairs window.

Shaking his head, glass going every which way, the blue and green troll shared a confused look through the ground-floor window before Draal realized he was out in the open.

Cursing, the spiky troll made a mad leap for some nearby bushes just as a spotlight landed where he had fallen. There was shouting on the human's end, talking about needing more backup, but Kanjigar's roar of rage drowned that all out. A few more pieces of furniture seemed to

meet their end upstairs according the the crashing sound and then there was a hard thud like someone had gone down. A second later, the tip of Daylight was repeatedly piercing through the ceiling and before anyone could think to get out of the living room, the floor fell through … along with Angor Rot.

The lanky troll hit the floor hard, likely denting the wooden floor. Yet, despite probably having the air knocked out of him, he was rolling into his crouch and taking in his surroundings as quickly as possible. Kanjigar, poking his head through the hole in the floor, cursed upstairs about being too big before his feet pounded heavily toward the stairs.

Blinky and Jim both sat there, dust still settling in the room, before Angor Rot stood up slowly like a spry cat that hadn't minded its fall from a tree. He seemed mostly unscathed from the battle upstairs, if a bit dusty. There were still small little magical archs jumping across his stone-flesh though, making him twitch oddly like a marionette with kinked strings. The magical backlash was still giving him problems from the look of it.

“As entertaining as this evening has been,” said troll darkly as he leaned down and pried his shadow staff and Suncreeper's blade from the rubble, the removal of the couch revealing their locations. “The Seer and I must be going. The hour is late and whelps must be put to bed.”

Jim and Blinky both stiffened, the hunter's intent palpable. In fact, Angor Rot was already moving forward, either to push Blinky away or to just grab Jim right out of the historian's grasp before portaling away.

The many-armed troll immediately reacted, trying to protect his student as he harshly pushed the teenager away from the assassin's grasp. He even had enough time to step into the hunter's path and throw a flower vase at the taller troll. Not that it seemed to do much more than make the hunter angry.

Jim, sliding into the kitchen from the shove, his shoulder squeaking on the linoleum, barely had time to ball around himself as Aaarrrgghh charged over the top of him like a mad bull and into the living room to Blinky's defense.

The teen lay there a moment on his side, watching troll feet tromp around in the room over. Everything was going too fast. The living

room was now being destroyed especially since Kanjigar had jumped over the banister and into the brawl. Angor Rot was barely being kept from his portals and from having his body slammed into a wall. The hunter was obviously trying to fall back into a tactical retreat with the way he was avoiding attacks.

Part of the mageling's mind still couldn't believe that all of this was happening just because he wanted to go home. Not-Trollhunter Jim was never supposed to be important and he certainly wasn't meant to be one of Angor Rot's marks. Were mages really so valuable?

The youth, now even more disoriented from being thrown into the kitchen, tried to ignore the ringing in his ears as he uncurled from his protective ball. He had to get up and out of here. He couldn't be underfoot if the battle led into the kitchen … and from the sound of things, it was coming his way.

He just ... couldn't get his legs to obey. The magical backlash had nearly knocked him out and the continued punishment afterward wasn't helping.

Luckily, Blinky was suddenly back at his side and helping him up. Troll-blood was now dripping down his nose from what looked like a harsh smack to the face. Two of his eyes were even squinted.

“Young Jim, to your feet. You are obviously his target and must go. The assassin is not the Pale Lady's champion for unwarranted reasons,” said the historian as he finished dragging the teen to his feet and towards the back door.

Stumbling as he was all but dragged by the troll, Jim tried to glance over his shoulder when he heard Kanjigar bark in pain. The blue troll had been pinned to the floor via Angor Rot and the assassin was now trying to draw on his face while Aaarrrggghhh struggled to pull himself out of a wall.

He was about to put his sigil on Kanjigar!

Stalling his feet, his past-life memories bubbling to the surface as he recalled just how dangerous the hunter was when he wasn't playing with his opponents, the teen choked out, “B-blinky! Don't let him mark Kanjigar with his s-sigil! He'll steal Daylight!”

And, watching Aaarrrgghh finish pulling himself out of the wall, the teen added, “And beware his blade! He has c-creeper's sun on it. D-don't let him knick Aaa-rrrgghh.”

At this, Blinky stalled, his uninjured eyes widening as he realized that this was more than a warning … it was a promise of things to come. There was no time for cowardice. No time for pause.

Cursing in trollish, Blinky grabbed a frying pan off the kitchen floor and ripped open the back door before he all but shoved Jim outside. He was then running back into the fray while crying, “To battle!”

Jim, stumbling outside in the chilled night air, stood there for a moment in a daze as he watched the door slam behind him. He had finally gotten outside, gotten away from his tormentor, but he almost wanted to go back in. He had to help the others. Angor Rot was not a trifle opponent.

Ears still ringing, Jim was about to stumble back inside, when he noticed movement to his left. It was Draal. Said troll was hiding behind a bush as a spotlight roamed around him, trapping him there in the shadows.

Staring at each other, the spiky troll waved something in hand-sign. Jim's hand sign was even weaker than his trollish, but the mageling was sure it was something about fleeing and regrouping in Trollmarket.

Nodding his head, the fuzz of magic still there, the teen was about to start back toward the woods and away from this chaos when he heard a voice ring through all the chaos. It was like the foghorn from a lighthouse while a storm raged all around him … a reminder of why he had rushed to the surface to begin with.

“W-what's going on?! We showed up as fast as we could. What do you mean there's something in the house? Is it Jim?! W-whats that crashing sound?!”

Jim would know that voice anywhere. He knew every tone it could make. It was the voice of his mother, Barbara Lake.

The teenager's feet stalled once more, soft grass crushed underfoot. The very air in his lungs caught if only so he could listen better. Even the evening wind seemed to be still.

“Stay back, ma'am. We just called you to make sure no one was supposed to be in the house. We think there's some kind of wild animal in there,” came a gruff voice. A police officer from the sound of it.

“An animal? What kind of animal?” continued Barbara's voice, her tone in near hysteria.

Jim, standing there in the shadow of the house, police lights flickering just on either side, slowly turned and gave a look to Draal. As if knowing what the young mage was thinking, Draal shook his head and signed something about not being able to protect him on the surface.

James Lake Jr. found … that he did not care.

At that, his hearing returned, like a wave coming into shore. The whole depth of the world suddenly came back to him. Everything immediately hurt. The lights were too bright and the sounds too loud, yet Jim found himself stumbling through the bushes opposite Draal regardless and towards the front of the street. He didn't care that there were now five cop cars in the street and a game warden with a tranq gun. He didn't care that every gun was immediately trained on him as he fell through the bushes. He didn't even notice that Barbara was stepping out of Strickler's car and not her own. All he saw was his mother, her hair unkempt and her clothes wrinkled. There were red rings around her eyes, and she looked like she had lost weight.

She had been mourning him, missing him, and hurting because of him and his stupidity.

And with those thoughts, Jim finished stumbling across the street. He threw himself into the shocked woman's arms before she could even react, bursting into tears as he cried out to his mother. He was sorry. He was so sorry. Everything was his fault.

Everyone in the street was at first flabbergasted, the chaos in the house all but forgotten as a lost teenager fell into his mother's arms, the two of them slowly sinking onto the pavement as Barbara realized her boy had come back. And soon she was sobbing as well, her arms tightening around her child while she buried his head into the crook of her neck, repeating over and over again that she got her baby back.

If anyone saw the glint of eyes in the house glance out into the street, the flash of purple in the house, or the fleeing of a blue blur from the bushes, it was ignored for more pressing matters. After multiple weeks, James Lake Jr. had finally been found.

Strickler, having driven Barbara to her house after getting a call about a break-in at her house, could only stand there in shock as mother in son were reunited. The two of them were now slumped onto the

ground like a puddle of raw emotion, clinging to each other as if afraid they'd be torn apart. It might have been a touching scene to see such a reunion, but all it did was enrage Walter.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He was supposed to have more time to plan and scheme. Now, all his plans were ruined! That fool of an assassin! How was he supposed to protect Young Atlas now? It might have been less than ideal for the young mage to be in Angor Rot's cold clutches, but it would have been safer there than being on Bular's radar.

Slamming his car door, telling himself that he'd think of something, Walter made his way around the car and two the two embracing figures.

He was flexible … he'd make this work. Even Bular wasn't stupid enough to eat a seer. *Hopefully*.

Chapter End Notes

> Even when kicked through the floor … Angor Rot's still a badass. (⌐▨_▨)
>
> Also, it only took 30 chapters but Jim finally got back to his mom … and also Strickler … and probably Nomura and Bular. My, that's going to be an awkward housewarming party. (=ˋ□□=)

Bumbling Ballawasks

Chapter Notes

> I don't much care for this chapter. It's been done for three days. So, I just proofread it and kicked it out of the writing nest because I'm sick of staring at it. Not all chapters can be suspense-filled troll battles, I guess. (¬、¬)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Barbara didn't know if it was due to the shock of being ripped from sleep by the police or that she had woken up in a strange bed. It had been so hard to sleep and eat properly. Then again, it could be the fact that she was sitting on the cold road having the warmth leeched from her body as she clung to her son.

Kissing the top of Jim's head again, she whispered into her son's ear that she was here now. Barbara then tried to readjust her hold on her child as Walter walked over to her side of the car, the man quickly kneeling at her side.

His voice was full of concern as he stated softly, “The officers said an ambulance was just called. They'll be here shortly to take Jim and you to the hospital. I was given a blanket and some water for you while we wait.”

Jim immediately stiffened in her arms while Strickler covered the two of them in a thermal blanket, the man continuing, “They also said the house has gone quiet, and the back door is open. Whatever was in there seems to be gone, but the police are going to do a full sweep. They are saying … it’s a mess in there. It looks like bears rampaged through it.”

Eyes going wide, her hand still petting Jim's head, all Barbara could state was, “Oh… Oh… my. It’s a good thing … I wasn't home.”

“Agreed,” said Walt as he tried to readjust the blanket as it slid down, his fingers stalling when Jim jerked away from him. Immediately, he pulled his fingers away only to stare in surprise at the red stain there. Barbara took in a deep breath when she noticed the blood as well.

“J-jim. Jim?! Are you bleeding, sweety?” she asked in a panic,

Strickler helping Barbara as they both searched for any wounds. It was easy enough to find the marking on his back shoulder.

The woman immediately noticed it for what it was … someone had carved into her child. She was sobbing all over again, Jim's face in her hands as she asked who had hurt him.

Walter, eyeing the wound, knew a cursed mark when he saw one. Given the freshness of the wound and his most recent command to fetch the boy, the changeling wondered if this was Angor Rot's doing. Yes, he had told the assassin to keep the boy contained, but he didn't think that he'd go far enough to carve into him?! There were lesser types of imprisonment spells, so why go so far? Then again, he couldn't identify the spell's purpose at first glance … maybe it wasn't an imprisonment spell at all. He didn't trust the assassin as far as he could throw him.

Placing a hand on Barbara's shoulder so she'd look at him, he stated calmly that he'd see if any of the officers had a medical kit before the EMTs got there. The redhead grabbed his hand and squeezed it in thanks, offering a sad smile.

Jim, seeming to notice this, finally looked at Strickler. It was a strange look for Young Atlas, like he was accusing Walt of carving the mark into him, but then again, the boy was apparently a Seer. Maybe … he did know that Walt had sent Angor Rot after him. Then again, he didn't know the magnitude or reach of the boy's magic, but even standing right here, he could see the blue flicker in the boy's eyes and taste energy in the air. There was definitely magic in the boy, but Seer magic? He didn't know. They were a rare breed even during the magic eras of the world.

Repeating that he'd be right back, the man rose to his feet, quickly scanning the shadows for any signs of trolls or changelings alike. He needed to do some quick leg work and cover up what needed to be hidden. Maybe he could even de-escalate this whole thing if … Strickler's plans immediately derailed in his head. There, a few cop cars down was a black SUV, and from the said vehicle, observing the whole mess was Roy Rockhold. He had stepped out of his vehicle and was taking in the chaos with a curious gaze before his eyes met Stricklander's.

Besides himself, Strickler's eyes glinted in rage that the other changeling was so brazenly implanting himself in Stricklander's business. Rocklander, in turn, allowed a slow yet faint smile to spread

across his face. It was a smile … no human could ever pull off. He looked more like a predator, a *hungry thing*, than he did a person. That smile was a promise, a challenge towards Stricklander's position of power, and they both knew it. He was looking for dirt or some show of disloyalty to offer to the Bular.

And changelings didn't really acknowledge the word demotion: *death* was far more likely.

Deciding not to give into the taunt while also acknowledging that it would look suspicious if he didn't at least speak with Roy, Strickler made his way over to the redhead. He did not rush, he didn't lower his head, and he offered no further shows of irritation. His voice was even calm and collected as he spoke, "It is nice to know you go out on missions, Rocklander. The question is, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be … cleaning up an … information leak?"

Rocklander, crunching down on whatever hard candy he was sucking on, smiled wickedly before tossing his head in the direction where none other than Sergeant Ben Gulager stood, the man flashing a light through one of the front windows of the Lake house.

Leaning more against the car door of his black SUV, probably still thinking he had the upper hand here, the ginger stated coolly, "The children have been properly discredited. Every single one of them is likely heading to therapy for mass hysteria. That one though, the old man, he's obviously caught on to the cover-up after all the footage from his police cruiser was destroyed. His report was pointedly vague, cryptic even, like he was blind and deaf the whole time Bular was trying to eat him and his cruiser. And, since he hasn't fallen into one of my traps yet, I'm certain that he knows something's after him. Feels like the old days … when I had to trick my food into coming out into the forest so the rest of the herd would not see."

Walt raised a brow, not the least bit surprised that Rocklander liked to play with his food. That man alone was probably why the first American Settlers were afraid to go out into the woods.

"Gulager is an old fixture in this town. I'm not surprised that he's suspicious. Either way, deal with it quietly and carefully," said Stricklander simply, glad that Roy had changed the topic to himself without Walter really trying.

Yet, right when Strickler nodded and was about to turn away, returning to his initial task, Roy asked, "So, it's obvious why I am here

… but why are you here? Seems an odd location for a high school teacher?"

Titling his head just so, unwilling to move his feet, the older changeling stated simply, "Keeping an eye on my target. Same as you."

Roy hummed as if he didn't believe that for a moment, adding, "Keeping an eye, huh? Seemed like you were keeping more than your eye on her. Couldn't help but notice how your hands seemed to linger longer than they should have. You aren't getting attached, are you? They're meat, Stricklander. Pets at best."

Stricklander's fingers twitch, part of him wishing to reach for one of his blades, but he kept his composure because he knew Roy was right about that. He shouldn't form a connection … connections got you killed.

"So," continued Roy, his eyes glinting in glee as if he knew he'd gotten under the elder changeling's skin, "Is that the child? Bular's interloper? The skillet menace with flamingo battlements? The one that Kanjigar fetched right from under him?"

Walter raised an eyebrow … Roy certainly was keeping his ear to the ground over this. Then again, it had been decades since anyone besides the Trollhunter had been able to rile up Bular. So, even though Strickler wanted to lie, to get Roy off his back, he knew it was too late to deny such things. Some kind of news was getting back to Bular tonight and it best be what Strickler wanted it to be. If Roy had to be the mouthpiece, then it was what it was.

Folding his fingers into a steeple, as if in thought, Strickler turned his head as an ambulance finally pulled up, an EMT jumping out and immediately heading to the mother and son. Staring for a moment, Walter spoke carefully, "Yes, it is James Lake Jr. Bular's little bane. It seems like he was released or escaped Trollmarket. I will be sticking close to the boy and his mother while I try to uncover what the boy knows. Now, if you excuse me. Some of us actually bother to keep an eye on our targets."

Roy, smile washing away, snapped his head back to the Lake house where Gulager no longer was. Cursing softly under his breath, the FBI agent started a slow jog towards the house, likely to regain sight of his prey.

Walt, in turn, headed back towards his own targets just as the EMTs

started helping Jim into the back of the ambulance. He wasn't letting either one out of his sight. Luckily, he already had a plan in mind.

…

"Yeah, that looks nasty, but not life-threatening. Let me throw some gauze on that and then we'll get you a hospital ride, right kiddo?" said an EMT, the woman offering a strained smile before covering Jim back up with a thermal blanket while she headed deeper into the ambulance, likely to get some gauze and tape. His mom probably would have been doing it herself, but she was standing a few feet away, speaking with some officers.

They were keeping their voices down, but Jim did keep hearing about the destruction of the house's interior, some creepy cult marks on the floor, blood on the floor, and Jim's state. They wanted to make sure Jim was stable enough to talk about what happened. They also needed to take pictures when he got to the hospital … of his back … and his wrist … and the bruises.

The only real harm was what Angor Rot had done, but that stupid band had left a mark as well as sword training with Draal. It was not painting a pretty picture if his mom's horrified expression and shaking hands were anything to go by. They probably thought he was kidnapped by a cult or something.

Sighing, running a hand through his hair, Jim wondered what he was going to say to the cops. Trolls were real? Yeah, no. That was a one-way trip to the psych ward and mental health medication for the rest of his days. He needed to think of something, *fast*. In his past life, he remained mostly out of the limelight when it came to public servants. Now … now he'd made a mess of things.

Maybe he should have just gone back with the trolls. They were correct. Right now, he didn't have enough magic to truly protect himself on the surface, especially if Angor Rot was after him as well as Bular. And the mark on his back? Even now he could feel something there between the throbs of pain. It made him sick and he kind of wanted to claw and scratch at it until the foreign feeling was gone.

Sighing again, his eyes tilting towards the Lake house, part of Jim wondered if he could offer an excuse so he could go fetch his amulet and other magical items. Such thoughts ended quickly though when an aging man stepped up to him.

"E-evening J-james. I'm g-glad you finally made your way ho-m-me.

Your mom's been w-worried."

Sitting there, confused by the odd comment, it took him a minute to remember this man, memories of stranger danger and anti-drug lectures in the gymnasium coming to mind.

"Mr … Gulager, right?" asked the boy, reading the officer's name tag awkwardly. "Are you … going to take my statement?"

Looking over his shoulder for a moment, as if looking to see if anyone was watching, the man shook his head before stating calmly, "N-not me, Jim. A strange f-f-fellow by the name Roy Rockhold will likely be doing s-so. Do not t-trust him … I don't think he's h-human."

Jim stiffened, not liking the sound of that at all. It was even odder that Gulager knew inhuman things were about. Did all the cops know how odd Arcadia was?

"Forgive me for m-my briefness, s-s-son, but I g-gotta be quick. T-Tobias and the other t-teens were picked up by me a few-ww nights ago … they were being c-chased by a dark t-t-troll at the time," said the officer softly, his mustached lip seeming to twitch at the memory while Jim took in a sharp breath. "They're m-m-mostly fine, some br-bruising, but no one believes-s them, and I fear f-f-for their ss-safety if they continue to s-speak the t-truth."

Besides himself, Jim was glancing around, paranoia now crawling up his spine. What was going on?! What mess had he thrust himself into now? Why couldn't he just get a bloody normal teenage day?! He hadn't gotten one since he came back to the past! It was like he was stuck in an unpredictable speed run, the game's rules changing as he went along.

"Now Jim, g-generally I'd never ask s-someone to lie. I don't think-k highly of l-liars, but …," the man sighed and then clapped a hand onto Jim's good shoulder, squeezing it slightly in a supportive gesture, "lie your b-butt off, b-boy. Lie like it's g-going out of style. W-we'll talk more later, p-promise. Right now, I n-need to shake off my t-tail."

Then, almost too fast for an aging man, the officer was gone, leaving Jim sitting there. He could already feel the additional anxiety crawling up his spine. In fact, his blood pressure spiked when he noticed that Strickler had somehow teleported next to his mom in the three seconds he was speaking with Gulager! Really?! Just how bad was his luck?

…

Zoning in on Barbara's new location, Strickler tried to strip any of the rage he had gathered after speaking with Rocklander. He latched onto a calm expression as he carefully placed a hand on her shoulder. The woman had a hand over her mouth as she turned towards him, the officers having finished speaking with her. She all but fell into his arms, tears streaming down her face as she spoke in a shaky tone.

"W-walt, it's horrible. This is all so horrible," she whispered, her tone rambling, "S-someone cut into him, my baby. And there are cult marks on the living room floor. The whole house … is a mess. The doors are barely on the hinges from what they said. It isn't safe to stay there … especially if they want to come back. How am I supposed to protect him? It isn't safe. I-I don't know what to do."

Her thin fingers were now curled into his shirt like she was hanging from a cliff. Barbara was desperate and was looking to him for answers.

Carefully, Walter wrapped an arm around her back to keep her standing, even going so far as to kiss her on the forehead before replying, "Don't worry, Barbara. We'll figure this out together. They'll take Jim to the hospital, clean him up, and take his testimony. Then, when he's released … you and Jim can come and stay with me. It's in a safe part of town, and it will be safer there than in a hotel."

Eyes widening, her shaking letting up slightly, Barbara stepped away slightly so she could really look Walt in the face. It was like she was looking for any signs of uncertainty as she asked, "A-are you sure? It's not that I don't appreciate the offer, but … is there space? And I haven't even spoken to Jim about … us. It's … I don't …"

Smiling at her, Strickler took her hand into his and squeezed, stating simply, "It's fine. I can empty the spare room and scare up a bed for Jim. As for us … Jim's a smart kid. He'll understand."

And yet, as he titled his gaze up and away from a thankful Barbara, he couldn't help but catch Jim's gaze. The teen looked anything but understanding.

…

Vendel tilted Kanjigar's face back and forth, looking at the glowing sigil there … or what there was of the sigil of Angor Rot. There were only a few glowing lines on the Trollhunter's face.

“I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but thank the old gods that Blinky was there,” said the elder as he released the Trollhunter’s face, Kanjigar rolling his jaw in discomfort.

Blinky, currently under one of Aaarrrgghh’s arms as if looking for ticks, huffed in response, “What does that mean?”

Stepping away from the Trollhunter, Vendel's milky eyes turned to the other occupants of his work area, his tone as dry and biting as ever, "It means your brief show of blundering bravery saved Kanjigar from a working sigil. This one is so incomplete I doubt Angor Rot can even sense Kanjigar with it.”

Then, as if in afterthought, he added. “And you probably saved Aaarrrgghh as well. Color mere impressed, Blinkous.”

Dropping Aaarrrgghh’s arm, having double-checked his friend for any nicks from the sun-creeper's blade, the blue troll tapped all his fingers together almost nervously. He was obviously surprised by the compliment and could only respond with a surprise, “T-thank you, Vendel.”

The older troll snorted at Blinkous's bashful tone before he headed over to a nearby table, stating coyly, “I would be careful with your bouts of bravery though Blinkous … or you might end up in my healing dwell more often like this blue blistering fool.”

Kanjigar shook his head in exasperation because he wasn’t injured that *often*. Blinky, in turn, placed a hand over his still-squinting eyes, seemingly horrified at the prospect.

“Now, let’s go over the incident once again,” said the elder, ignoring the eye rolls from most of the trolls there. “You got to the seer’s dwelling. There was already a mess, likely from the seer trying to defend himself. The assassin, Angor Rot, was there. Kanjigar attacked and with Draal’s assistance, they pushed the assassin upstairs. Blinky then tried to assist Seer Jim with his injuries before the battle made its way back downstairs. Angor Rot then stated that he had come for the boy, yes?”

There were replies of confirmation.

“And none of you were seen after making such a racket? I’m surprised the human dwelling is still standing … for that matter none of you were seen?” asked the milky-eye troll as he leaned on his staff, eyeing all of them suspiciously.

Draal, having been staring at his ‘crippled’ arm this whole time in a distracted manner, rubbed the back of his neck nervously while Blinky and Aaarrrgghh merely smiled nervously.

The historian, not liking the pale troll's expression, added wearily, “O-of course not. Do you take us for bumbling ballawasks?”

The dry look Vendel continued to give them all said that he thought exactly that.

“Now,” continued the elder, apparently letting the accusation hang there as he turned his attention back to the table he was next to and the bloodied curtain there. “You said that there was magic in the air when you entered the human dwelling? That there were magical arches over the two of them?”

“Yes, Jim’s blue magic was obvious. Then there was yellow and purple as well,” said Blinky as he stepped up the table, his hands wringing together as he looked at the blood-stained curtain on the table with a pained grimace. “Do you think it was a magical backlash from something Jim did or, perhaps, from … the cursed mark?”

“Blue, you say. There weren't any red arches?” asked Vendel, ignoring Blinky's question as he flicked through the pages of a nearby book that was filled with different types of cursed mark references.

“No,” said Blinky nervously, his stomachs sinking as he realized where this was going. “It was blue.”

“Did you find the blood mage’s blade at least?” asked Vendel, flicking through another page.

“We hadn’t the time to look,” said the historian, adding carefully, “Certainly there are more pressing issues than the blade, Vendel? Like what that cursed mark was? How should we get Jim back? We can’t leave him up there unprotected.”

Sighing, head bowing slightly, Vendel softly admitted, “There are many, many concerns on my mind lately, Blinky. I knew seers brought chaos, but to think … the bridge, a fetch, changelings, the assassin’s return, a cursed mark, and a blood mage’s blade? I worry that in taking on the seer, I have welcomed darkness into Trollmarket. I fear that the mageling might be going dark on us. I do not know if we should even try to bring the boy back. Technically, he did free himself, and I said he could leave once he learned how. In fact, I wonder if I should ban any further entry for the boy?”

The surprised and horrified looks on all the trolls' faces were almost deafening, but their plethora of disagreements soon fell over the aged troll like a wave.

“Please, Vendel, be reasonable,” started Kanjigar as he stepped closer to the elder. “Bular is out there and now Angor Rot. We cannot just leave him to fend for himself. He will perish.”

“Jim. Good kid. He’s not dark,” stated Aaarrrgghh, frowning deeply as he shifted on his arms.

“Yes, old friend, please listen to the others. Jim’s always been well-meaning. He’s been rash and scared, but he is not *dark*,” almost begged Blinky, recalling how trust-filled Jim’s eyes had been when the boy had warned him of the sigil and the sun-creeper’s blade. “Furthermore, we, as the most stable of magical beings in the area, have a responsibility to at least teach him how to magically protect himself. Please don't deny him entry from Trollmarket.”

A few such arguments followed after. Draal even tried to remind the elder that Jim had saved the Trollhunter, thus gaining his father's gaze. Something he had been trying to ignore since they had gotten back. The youngest troll knew he was running on borrowed time. Soon, his father would corner him and know what a failure he was destined to be.

Draal feared it might break him.

Vendel, meanwhile, was rubbing his forehead with a large paw as the argument continued. Looking up at the Hearthstone above him, he prayed for strength.

Bowing his horns, as if in temporary defeat, the elder stated simply, “Please understand, Trollmarket's safety will always be my number one concern. A mageling can be a great blessing, bringing new magic and life to an area, especially for magical creatures like ourselves.”

Blinky, smile returning, thinking that the pale troll had been easily convinced, didn't even get another word out before Vendel spoke again, “But, recall, such beings can bring great darkness as well. For now, I will withhold my judgment on Seer Jim. I pray to the old gods that I am just being wary, for I as well would hate to abandon the whelp, but Trollmarket will always be my first concern.”

With that, Vendel left the area, his staff clinking softly like some kind of ominous warning, leaving the other four trolls with heavy thoughts

of a Seer named Jim.

...

"But, nana! I have to go and check on Jim's house! It could be the changelings or the trolls!" cried Toby as he and the bat he was holding were kept from the door by the elder woman, police lights flickering outside next to the Lake house.

"No, you will not be going out their Toby-kins. We don't need any more group hysteria affecting you," she stated, standing in front of the door with her arms folded. "Besides, if there were monsters out there, a bat won't do. You'd need something with more power. Like nana's Glock 19."

She then hiked up her robe a little bit to show that there was a gun strapped to her lower leg.

The teen, finger raised as if in protest, stalled, scratching his chin before asking, "Nana, do you always wear a gun to bed?"

She giggled slightly, stating simply, "Oh sweety, I take my concealed carry everywhere. Even to bingo night."

Letting the baseball bat hang, brow-raising, Toby continued, "And you said 'if there are monsters out there'. So … you might actually believe me?"

The old woman offered a sly smile before leaning in, stating in a mysterious whisper, "I saw some weird stuff during the war, Toby-kins. Humans don't know everything in the heaven and earth. Plus, I didn't trust that FBI fellow as far as I could throw him. He was acting like a weasel in a chicken coop. He's up to something."

Besides himself, Toby smiled at his grandmother, stating warmly, "Thanks for not thinking I'm crazy, nana."

"Of course, sweety … but you still can't go out."

"What, come on?!" wailed the ginger, the teen throwing his hands up in the air in surrender. He totally should have stayed with Jim. It would have been much cooler than being trapped in the house with nana.

Chapter End Notes

Strickler is a sly fox, inviting the Lakes to stay at his house.

And poor Vendel. He's probably going to get hate for that scene. I pity anyone with such responsibilities. That's why I'll never run for mayor.

Furthermore, Nana is an old-school badass. No one can change my mind on that. XD

Breathless

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Douxie stalled his scooter and stared at his charm bracelet for a moment as he read the symbols there. It seemed he was here.

Tilting his head to the west, noting the flashing police lights in the distance, the wizard kicked the kickstand and stared at the house before him. Besides himself, the wizard-in-training couldn't help but mutter, "Yeah, that place is totally haunted."

"What gave it away? The mysterious fog in the area? The flickering lights throughout the neighborhood? The shuttered windows? The dead plants? The gathered crows?" asked Archie as he hopped off the back seat and onto Douxie's shoulder, eyeing the house before him.

"Yes, to all the above, but it's mostly the taste of magic in the area … its rancid," said Douxie with a frown as he placed his helmet on his seat.

Tail twitching, the dragon agreed as he hopped onto the sidewalk, "Yes, it's rancid, rotten even. It smells like something dead has been stalking about."

"You aren't filling me with confidence. I'm not really a fan of … the undead," stated the mage, wondering if he should have brought a flaming sword or something because the undead were, well, super undead. And this thing, if it was the being that had gotten all those kids a few decades ago, it also had *power*.

"There is a reason it's a banned magic," said the cat, his nose wrinkling as he started down the sidewalk. "Not that that's ever stopped anyone."

Nodding, the wizard-in-training started walking after his familiar, the two of them heading toward the house. Douxie took a moment to glance at the postal box and the name there: *Jack Sturges*. He stalled for a second, the name striking a chord.

"That name is familiar," he said flicking his charm bracelet while Archie hummed in agreement.

The cat added, “It should. That was the name of the child that got away during the Milk Carton Epidemic.”

Stalling in his browsing, Douxie frowned, “Well that can’t be a coincidence.”

“There are no coincidences when it comes to magic,” said the feline-dragon as the two of them started up the path toward the front door, the fog parting from the movement of their feet as they drew closer and closer to the house. Both figures winced as they headed up the steps, each one groaning under Douxie's weight.

“You don’t suppose we can come back when it’s less haunty?” asked Douxie nervously as he looked down at his familiar, raising his fist to knock on the door. Yet, the second he knocked, the hinges squealed, the door slowly swinging open … showing that the front door hadn’t been fully shut to begin with. It had been left open.

“Well, we could,” said the cat as he titled his head and tried to sneak a peek inside, “But magic is rarely subtle. I think we should go in.”

"It's a straight-up invitation," muttered the wizard-in-training, already deciding that he was going to hate this. Something that wanted you there, was rarely a good omen. Nonetheless, the mage lifted up his wrist so that the blue lights of his bracelet lit up the entrance.

…

Stepping into the aging house, Douxie immediately felt like this place was forbidden to him. The place looked old, like it had remained unchanged for decades and the blue light from his charm bracelet made it feel even more otherworldly. It was like he had stepped into a blue plane, where time was crawling at a slower pace. The chill in the air did not dissuade that feeling either.

Nonetheless, he headed forward, the old photos on the wall giving the illusion that he was being watched. The small shrine with a boy and his bike didn’t help to dissuade the feeling of misery in the place. It was like he had stepped into a tomb.

Finally heading out of the entrance hall and into the kitchen, the wizard-in-training found his voice as he stared at a set of bear traps on the kitchen table, “Yeah, there’s something wrong with this place.”

“Obviously,” agreed Archie as he hopped onto the table, his glasses glinting as he eyed the bear traps and the horseshoes there. Then,

acting very cat-like, the dragon added, “Let’s see what we can scare up.”

Then, Douxie realizing what was happening with a look of horror, watched as the dragon batted a horseshoe off the table. The mage made a mad grab for the horseshoe, but it still hit the wood floor with a heavy thud, the very house seemed to reverberate.

The mage gave his companion a look that said, ‘*Why would you do that*?!’

Titling his ears back and forth, as if waiting for a reaction or even the smallest of sounds, they both waited. When nothing happened after a minute or two, the familiar stated, “Just as I thought, there seems to be no one home. Let’s see if we can find any clues.”

Rolling his eyes, Douxie stood up straight and ran his hand through his hair. He then reached for the light switch since apparently no one was there. The kitchen switch … did nothing.

“Of course,” he muttered. “Can’t decrease the creep factor even a smidgen, can we?”

Archie snorted in agreement as they headed forward, sniffing at the air while the mage tilted his armband around, trying to get a hit on any magical items.

Surprisingly, as they made their way through the house, they found very few signs of magic. There were a few internet articles about changelings and other magical creatures posted on the office wall, but very little of the research material seemed legitimate. They didn't find one grimoire or actual spell books either. It showed that the occupant believed in magic but had very limited information about the world of the arcane.

Not surprising, but it was making Douxie wonder why there was a magical miasma here to begin with. Obviously, the occupant had happened upon something that finally did have magic … or it had always been there, and something had finally woken it up. Lingering possessions and traveling curses were a thing after all.

“Only one door remains,” said the mage as they exited the attached garage, the car still strangely there as they headed to a door with far too many locks on it.

“It’s the basement, isn’t it?” asked Archie before flicking his tail and

adjusting his glasses, "Almost predictable."

“Magic is rarely subtle,” tried to joke Douxie as he snapped his fingers and opened all the locks with a flash of blue magic, “Age before beauty.”

The cat rolled his eyes, but stepped in first, his ability to see in the dark much better than the mage's even with his glasses. Douxie, probably knowing it was useless, tried to click on the light switch. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t turn on.

Sighing in defeat, the mage headed down the old stairs, peaking around the corner when they finally got to the bottom. Immediately, he noticed that the entire area was covered in mist and a thin film of frost. This room was likely the origin of the magical burst the sensory stones had informed them about.

Walking across the floor, listening to the frost crunch underfoot as his breath turned white, Douxie summoned a floating light source and started to look around. This had to be the source, but magic was not natural to this area. So why was it here?

The answer came quickly enough as the blue light-orb floated above a black pool of water towards the back of the basement. The mage frowned at this, knowing all too well that water was the element between planes.

Flicking through the spells on his charm bracelet, the mage quickly summoned a coin from thin air. The young man then grabbed the coin right from the air before flicking it into the water like it was some kind of demented wishing well.

Immediately, there was a blue flicker on the surface of the water and then the water started to clear, leaving a clear pool behind. At first, nothing seemed wrong until there was a strange colored ripple on the surface. The color did not match Douxie's at all.

Archie flicked his ears at this reaction, humming, “A portal between planes defiantly formed here.”

"One sure did," agreed the mage as he stared at the water for a moment. Then, when it seemed safe, he leaned down and plucked something from the pool. He had to rinse the mud off it, the item having been there for some time already, but it looked like a green gemstone cut into a square. It seemed a bit too valuable to just be down here in the mud.

The cat arched at this, grousing, "Did you just touch that with your bare hands?! Douxie! You know better. It could be cursed!"

"It probably once was," replied the man as he lifted it up to the magical light source, frowning deeply as he stared at the cracks there, “But it's cracked now. Whatever power it contained ... has moved on."

Pocketing the stone, deciding to perform some tests on it later, Douxie reached in once more and pulled out his coin, wondering what magical symbol would form there.

Archie flicked his tail in irritation, muttering, “It seems to have moved on, you mean. Either way, it was obviously an anchor, but the water was what ultimately gave whatever it was an easy way through the planes. Can you at least tell what realm it came through?”

Rubbing the coin with his thumb and wiping some of the black grime off, the mage sighed as an evil eye appeared with a black iris staring up at him.

"It’s from the shadow realm," he muttered.

Humming, the cat-dragon groused, “That’s not good.”

“No, it is not,” replied Douxie.

…

Claire sighed as she leaned on the windowsill of her room, the night air coming to greet her with a cool breeze. She closed her eyes in thankfulness, surprised by how much this house arrest was really bothering her. It had only been a few days, not even a full week, and she already felt madness nipping at her. She doubted the rest of the Creepslayerz were doing much better … but at least they all were doing better than Jim.

“Poor Jim. One would think having magic would be cool, but being stuck down in Trollmarket has to suck," she said aloud to herself, her one earbud going silent for a moment as it started the next song on her list. "Though … I should ask Toby how one knows they have magic? Given this house arrest, maybe being babysat by trolls and learning wouldn’t be so bad.”

Frowning at the thought yet still daydreaming about the magical underground city because it really was amazing, the girl perked up as she saw something shift under a streetlamp outside.

For a second, she thought it was nothing since a tree stood nearby and that the wind might have just disturbed the branches. Yet, leaning in, her mind dwelling on goblins, the girl watched the streetlamp flicker again like the bulb was about to burn out.

Staring harder, the hair slowly rising on the back of her neck for some reason, the girl watched the bulb flicker one more time and then seemingly out of nowhere, there was a figure standing there in the dulled light.

The girl reeled back in surprise, a little creeped out by the sudden appearance of a person, especially since the figure was dressed … oddly. It looked like a woman in a white dress, her skirt having been dragged through the mud. The bottom was almost black. And she couldn't make out a face because there was a sheet or veil over it, a strange crown keeping it in place.

"What the f- "

The girl didn't even get to finish that thought when suddenly her phone beeped, causing her to look down. It was the Creepslayerz chat, an important message popping up on the screen.

Jim was back on the surface!

Gasping in surprise, overcome with joy that Jim had gotten out, the girl quickly recalled the strange figure and glanced back at the tree and street lamp. There was no one there … not that that made her feel any better.

…

Draal found himself slipping out of Vendel's workshop, Kanjigar still discussing the issue of Seer Jim with Aaarrrgghh and Blinky. Personally, Draal felt a bit guilty for not defending Jim's character more like Blinky had been, the two of them got along pretty well when sparring, but at the same time … he looked down at his right hand, noting the faint tremor that ran through it.

Looking around, afraid someone would see this moment of weakness, Draal found himself moving into a nearby alley. It was a tight fit and his broad shoulders nearly scraped the two neighboring buildings. Generally, like most larger trolls, he kept to the main thoroughfares of Trollmarket, but … he wanted to hide. He knew it was cowardly to do so, to flee like vermin, but he honestly felt like a waste of space. Since the seer appeared he had had his butt handed to him several times. He

was Draal the Deadly! He was supposed to be one of Trollmarket's best warriors yet here he was … getting his head smashed in by Bular and being thrown out of windows by Angor Rot.

He really wouldn't have lasted as the Trollhunter, would he?

He was fated to be a disgrace … and to become a cripple.

Draal felt his two hearts skip a beat, the thought burrowing under his skin like an infestation. Privately, the blue troll had hoped that his fear of the future would pass, like water under a bridge. He personally thought he'd just accept it and then he would go back to normal as if the seer hadn't said anything life-altering, but he was wrong. The truth was chipping away at him.

In fact, he was treating his right arm like it was already damaged, held close to his chest. Then there was that breathless incident he had, his hearts nearly beating out of his chest. A few trolls had even started to notice his odd behavior, asking after his health and if he had had his fill of crystals lately. Vendel had even checked him over with Jim. He had waved off their concern, stating it was nothing, even though his dread was growing worse and worse, mantras of *cripple* and *unworthy* echoing in his head.

Trolls had few diseases, given their magical nature, so the whole experience was terrifying.

With those thoughts weighing down his mind, Draal's breathing suddenly picked up and his two hearts started fluttering oddly in his chest. It was happening again. It felt like something inside of him was giving out and he couldn't get enough air.

"Keep it together, Draal. You're not a cripple yet. Keep it together. You must uphold the pride of your line," whispered Draal to himself as he stumbled deeper into the isolated alley, far from anyone's sight, leaning against one of the walls as his right hand shook.

If anything, his little pep talk made it worse and now he was gasping for breath like his throat was closing up. He was going to die here, wasn't he? By suffocation no less? He was going die a most inglorious death, found probably days letter curled up against a wall. He was going to die a joke, a failure!

With his breathing so heavy, Draal didn't hear the shifting of stone or the soft singing of magical armor until it was finally upon him, Kanjigar the Courageous sliding down from one of the building's roofs

and down into the alley, the whole area lighting up with the glow of his armor.

The irritated expression on Kanjigar's face was unmistakable. After all, Draal had snuck out of Vendel's workshop when the Trollhunter had turned his back. It was obvious that the two of them were to speak when he was done with Blinky, but here he was … hunting his son down again.

Sighing, the elder troll groused, "I know you think yourself quick-footed, my son, but slinking into a tight alleyway will only slow you down. Taking the rooves would have been a better choice if you really wanted to get any notable distance from me."

"In fact," continued the elder troll as he placed a hand on his son's arm, forcing him to turn towards him and actually speak with him, "I think we've both had enough of this game. I have noticed that you've been ignoring me these last few days and are slipping in your duties. It is best that we speak so that our minds are clear and ready for more pressing matters."

Yet, any irritation Kanjigar might have felt was quickly gone as his son turned towards him, the younger troll looking pale as he choked out, "F-f-father … p-pplease, cannn it n-not wait?"

Draal winced at the sound of his own voice as well as the horrified look covering his father's face. The younger troll knew he probably looked terrible, his spines faded and pale from the stress. Why couldn't he keep it together? He just had to suck it up.

Gloved hand coming forward, the warm light of the Trollhunter's armor lighting up Draal's pathetic disposition, Kanjigar cupped his son's head as he asked, "Draal, are you alright? Your breathing seems labored and your body is unbalanced. Are you ill?"

The teal troll tried to wave it off, tried to say he was fine, but his breathing was getting worse, and spots were starting to take up his vision. Before he knew it, he was losing his feet and his sire was suddenly keeping him upright.

"Obviously you are not," said Kanjigar, grunting as he forced most of Draal's weight onto on shoulder, "Come, let's get to a clearing with more air. You can sit down and breathe. Mimic my breathing if it helps."

The younger troll wanted to pull away, to say he was fine, but, ever

the obedient son, he did as he was asked. He didn't notice it at first, so focused on his father performing a breathing exercise next to him, but slowly his hearts started to calm down as he matched his father's breaths. And though his breathing was still shaky and far from ideal, the tightness in his chest started to loosen.

Finally, getting to a small clearing near one of the many cave streams, Kanjigar had them both sit down at the water's banks, little cavefish seemingly waiting for the two trolls to put their feet in so they could nibble at them.

Draal stared at the small darting creatures for a moment, hating how patiently his father was sitting there next to him, the older troll staring out at the water as if trapped in his own thoughts.

Finally, the silence seeming unwilling to leave unless forced, Draal turned his head towards his sire, swallowing before he muttered, "I'm sorry ... if I ... frightened you, father. I … just couldn't breathe."

The older troll turned to look at his offspring, shaking his head slightly as he spoke, "It is nothing you need to apologize for Draal. However, I am concerned that this has happened before. Is this why you have been ignoring me?"

Draal closed his eyes and tried to think of an excuse for his weakness as his right hand became a fist, but when he didn't respond, Kanjigar sighed sadly and continued speaking, "You are very proud, my son, but as I have recently learned myself, there is no shame in getting help. Soldier's Heart is not an uncommon ailment in warriors … especially if their skills have recently been tested."

The younger troll winced at that, recalling his recent losses.

Kanjigar, if he noticed the tightening of Draal's form, said nothing of it as he continued speaking, "I, myself, had a few bouts of it when I first became Trollhunter, especially since I felt insufficient for the role. The first time it happened, I thought my hearts were about to explode and that all the air in the world had fled from me. That was how Aaarrrgghh had found me, wheezing and shaking. He gave no judgment. Instead, he said he understood and took me to Blinky to have some teeee. They both were good friends and helped me improve my sense of self after that. In time, my confidence returned, and I understood my worth. After all, I had something to protect."

And with that, he placed a hand on Draal's shoulder, offering a warm yet comforting smile.

Draal, despite himself, tried to return the smile though he was obviously still shaken.

Taking in a few more deep breaths, his breathing catching but nearly back to normal, Draal gathered the courage to speak. He knew this was coming, that he'd have to confess his failings sooner or later, but it still hurt to say out loud, "Thank you, father. I am glad to know my … breathless moment ... is not unheard of, but it is the coming future that I fear … and these last few weeks have shaken my … composure rather badly."

Kanjigar frowned at this, his hands folding together before he nodded in understanding, "I take it the seer said something."

Swallowing twice, his words feeling sour on his tongue, Draal finally spoke, "Yes, I recently found out why I wasn't chosen to be the Trollhunter … in his future. The seer let me know that it was because I was … damaged goods."

The pained look that covered Kanjigar's face could have toppled mountains. Draal wanted to stop there, but it was out in the air now, like thistle seeds contaminating a farmer's field. There was no taking it back. It was best to just get it over with.

Swallowing sharply, hating how his hearts were acting odd again, Draal looked down at his right hand, stating softly, "I had wanted to know why I wasn't destined to be the next Trollhunter. Why I was unable to follow in your stead. I had wanted to know who I was competing against, why I wasn't good enough, and what I had to change to be worthy."

The words were spilling out now, like water over a flood plain after a heavy rain. He wanted to drown the world with the truth. Yet, somehow, he managed to keep Jim's admittance of a human Trollhunter to himself, but everything else was free game.

"The seer told me … that I am to be a cripple," finally choked out Draal, his right hand shaking something terrible. "I'm weak and barely useful enough to be the companion to the future Trollhunter. I am … meant for nothing, a born failure."

Quickly standing up, careless of water getting into his boots, Kanjigar stepped up to his son and placed his forehead against his creation's, the older troll trying to comfort his son as Draal started to wheeze again, trying to bow his head away as he felt tears gathering in his eyes. He felt so pathetic ... a disgrace even.

“Shhh, Draal. Come now my son, no need for panic,” tried to comfort the blue troll, one of his hands taking Draal’s shaking right hand into one of his own and squeezing it in reassurance. “Please breathe with me. The seer’s words are not yet decided, there is no need to fear, and you certainly are not a failure. You are invaluable.”

A stifled sob escaped Draal at those words. The younger being wanted to hide his face away and deny his father’s claim, but Kanjigar just kept talking soothingly, refusing to let go. “And how can you not see how valuable you are? My son trains the future Trollhunter. Honestly, I couldn't be prouder.”

A full-on sob escaped the warrior this time, Draal giving in and leaning his whole weight onto his sire as he choked out, “I am afraid … I do not wish to be crippled. I do not want to fail.”

Gripping the back of Draal's head tightly, a deep rumble escaped Kanjigar as he tried to comfort his only child. “Failure is not meant to be feared, my son. It is meant to be learned from, something to be overcome. As for your arm, that has not yet come to part. The seer gave you a warning so it’s still possible to change it … And, even if we cannot, who doesn't want a metal arm?

Draal hated the laugh-sob that escaped him at the last comment, the younger troll trying to wipe away tears.

And so, the moment dragged out for a few minutes, Kanjigar whispering softly to him like he was a whelp. Draal didn’t push the comfort away and gripped his father’s hand gladly, accepting the attention. It was only after he had calmed down somewhat that Kanjigar stood up straight, smiling calmly down at his creation.

“I am glad that you got that off your chest, Draal,” finally said the older troll. “I have been worried that it was something I had done. I feared I did something to push you away again.”

Wiping a paw down his face again, trying to make sure there weren’t any tears left, Draal softly choked out, “I know … and I am sorry. I will try to be more … forthcoming … in the future.”

Nodding, Kanjigar motioned for them to head back towards the alley but stalled, making Draal stop as well. The Trollhunter seemed to dwell on it for a second as if deciding if it was worth saying or not, but finally, he asked, “Did the seer happen to reveal who the next Trollhunter was meant to be? Who you would train?”

Draal, at first surprised, stood there, shell-shocked. Part of him wanted to do as he was asked, but … he had promised to keep it to himself. So, releasing a long down-out breath, Draal frowned and shook his head, stating simply, “I cannot say father … it is the seer’s truth and not mine to give.”

Humming, unhappy but unwilling to force it either, Kanjigar rolled his neck before stating, “It was worth a try. Now, come, let us go have some of Blinky’s teeee and then we should get some rest. We must brave the surface tomorrow.”

“The surface?” mimicked Draal, wondering if they were going to go after Seer Jim despite Vendel’s worries.

Nodding, the older troll explained, “Yes, I want to see if we can at least find Jim’s location to make sure he’s safe. Then, we still have a fetch to, well, fetch. Plus, who else would keep Bular socialized? If I hadn’t been around for these last few decades exchanging quips with him, I am quite certain he would have lost the ability to speak in complete sentences.

Despite himself, at first surprised his father made a joke, Draal laughed.

…

Angor Rot stumbled into his den, the shadow portal a good foot off the ground and acting up. He turned and glared at the portal for a moment before dissipating it. He couldn’t believe how much that magical backlash had messed with his form and magic. The shadow staff was being particularly temperamental like it didn’t quite recognize him.

Throwing the staff onto his makeshift table, a stone slab made of concrete blocks, Angor Rot headed to his nest which was little more than a gravel pit covered by furs and old fabric. He sat down with a hiss, his sides aching and his whole form strangely lagging.

What had that little fool done to his spell?!

Hissing in pain again, Angor Rot pulled his hand away from his side, blackish goo coming back. The old gods … was he bleeding?

The assassin didn’t even get to question this when suddenly the same black liquid started to dribble from his nose, making him wipe it with the back of his hand. It was at this point that he noticed a faint light

coming from the palm he had cut while trying to curse Jim.

Opening his palm, he could see a faintly glowing spell circle on his hand. It almost looked like the one he had placed on Jim's back, but how had it ingrained itself into his flesh?!

Glaring at the soft blue glow, he couldn't help but note the faintest traces of purple magic. The old witch from the Sink Hole! Had she set up a magic trap for him?!

Despite himself, the troll roared in rage and turned toward one of the old brick walls in his sewer den, punching his fist through the wall.

He just wanted to get out from under that Morgana’s gaze, especially since he feels it in his chest, that she is gathering power again. Instead of pressing her gaze onto the seer so that he might find a way to steal back at least his soul and free himself from her service, he now has another set of eyes on him!

Raging, the troll started ripping apart his den, screams full of hatred echoing down the sewers. What had that witch done to him?!

Chapter End Notes

> That angsty Draal scene has been in my files forever. I'm glad I finally got to throw it out because I adore some father-son bonding.
>
> Daouix’s setting himself up to be a horror movie victim and Claire isn’t far behind.
>
> And Angor Rot … poor babe. It's unfortunate that he’s a favorite of mine because my muse can be a mean little thing. ◥(ค⁰₩⁰ค)◤

Reenacting Dinner Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim had been trapped in this hospital room for over a day now. People came in and out of his room as if it had a revolving door and the teen didn't know if he should be thankful or to feel ashamed for everyone's trouble, especially after his mom finally fell asleep in the chair beside his bed. She at last seemed at peace, her red locks dancing all over the top of the medical blanket she was covered in.

Part of Jim wanted to ask her to go home and sleep after the first time it happened, but he felt kind of selfish. After all, he had been struggling these last few weeks just to get home to her. Plus, he really didn't want to leave her out of his sight with the way Strickler was wandering around.

The man just wouldn't leave!

He'd disappear, seemingly unable to sit down, and just when Jim would feel somewhat safe, Strickler would wander back in with a cup of tea or a blanket! Once, he even returned with a set of clean clothes for the teen. Jim had reluctantly accepted them, not wanting to be stuck in a hospital gown indefinitely, but the man just put Jim on edge because he kept touching his mom's shoulder or wrist or hand. It didn't seem threatening, the touches gentle, but Jim *knew* what that man really was: a changeling.

Furthermore, Jim was certain with the way Strickler kept looking at him, that he knew what Jim was as well.

Sighing, Strickler and his mom having left to take care of things, Jim was finally left alone. The teen had dwelt on asking if she could grab his amulet and protection stones, but he had struggled on how to ask for those items … that is if the police hadn't taken them as evidence.

For one, he didn't want to sound like a raving lunatic and end up on psych medications for the rest of his years. Plus, Gulager's warning was a sound dissuader. There were changelings about after all and Jim wasn't referring to just Walt. There was this man with a sharp face and red hair who kept wandering around, speaking with the officers and the doctors. There was just this hungry glint in his eyes like a

predator roaming around looking for an opening.

Jim's conclusion was verified when Walt came back once and grabbed the man by the elbow, dragging him out into the hall. Jim was unable to see them, but he could hear the two arguing in low voices. They knew each other and the irritated look when Walter came back spoke volumes.

It was easy to conclude that if Jim wanted to live … he needed to lie.

And lie he did. He lied right through his teeth, more than aware of that red-haired man as he leaned against the spare bed in the room, staring at him. That stare could have pierced stone, but Jim did what he had to do, leaning into the speculations that Detective Scott and the others already had. Jim played off the spotty details as trauma or something, but in the end, he was sure that Detective Scott thought he was kidnapped by a cult that liked to wear monster masks. Why? Because they thought he could see the future or something crazy.

In the end, the detectives were very concerned but accepted Jim's testimony. Then, they set to work. Honestly, if he had really been kidnapped by a cult, he would compliment their resolve, but as of right now: he hoped that the police let sleeping trolls lie. They didn't need any more of their local law enforcement eaten … yes, *more*. Looking back at the police department's retention problem while adding trolls into the equation, everything made a lot more sense.

Personally, Jim merely found it as another reason to distrust Walt and any other changelings about.

…

Two days later, poking at his hospital Jello as boredom threatened to overtake all traces of sanity, Jim immediately perked up as his mother staggered into the room with a heavy duffle bag. She had said she was heading back to the house to grab some things since Jim was about to be discharged and they couldn't stay at the house. After all, the house was trashed and missing *at least* one door. Plus, it was a crime scene as well.

"Hey Jim, I grabbed a few changes of clothes and your favorite pillow as well as some other things," said Barbara as she hefted the heavy bag onto the hospital bed, Jim pulling his legs away as he sat up. The teen could admit that he would rather have his own bed after a long stay with the trolls, but wherever they stayed was fine as long as his mom knew he was safe. He didn't dislike hotels, especially if they had

a pool. Maybe he could invite Toby over and they could finally catch up. Mom said the other teen was asking after him.

Unzipping the bag, ready to change and get out of there, he couldn't help but stall when the first thing to pop out of the bag was the fluffy head of Dr. Teddy Bear. For a moment, the boy stalled. He wasn't sure what had happened to the little stuffed animal after his fight with Angor Rot, but here it was again, button eyes staring up at him.

Barbara, noticing how Jim had stilled, immediately became flustered and stepped forward to take the childhood toy away, "I knew it was silly stuffing it in there, but when I was packing your bag, I just saw him laying there all lonely on the floor and thought that maybe I should bring him. I knew it was ridiculous, but mom just can't stop seeing you as her little boy who needs his favorite bear. I'll take it back home. It doesn't need-"

Taking the bear in hand before his mother could snatch it away, Jim stared at the toy, dwelling on the love behind the small act. A slow smile bled onto his face at his mother's kindness, and he rose from his bed. Then, bear still in hand, he folded his arms around her in a warm embrace, whispering softly into her shoulder, "It's perfect mom. Thank you for always thinking of me."

If Jim felt wet tears dripping down into his hair as she pulled him closer, neither said anything about it. They just clung to each other, once again glad to be reunited.

Finally letting go, more than ready to get out of this place, Jim asked the most relevant question: did she find his magical items in the living room (some of them might be under the remains of the couch)? He, of course, didn't blatantly call them magical items. He listed his *favorite* red cooking knife (the glow feature's cool!), a bulky blue good luck necklace, and a leather bag full of strange rocks and books. His mom had originally raised a brow at the oddity of these items (especially a glowing kitchen knife), but he needed those items. He had had a strange dream the night before which left the teen feeling off-kilter. There had been a woman … a drowned woman that had pulled herself from death, wet footsteps following in her wake as she prowled the town for victims. Jim wasn't sure what the dream meant, if it was a warning or just a latent fear of dark waters, but he had a sinking feeling that it had to do with magic. And if there was something he had learned recently: magic did not like being ignored.

Raising a brow, still thinking the request was odd, she added, "Since

searching under the remains of the couch was a requirement, Walt said he'd look for those items. I went upstairs and packed everything else. Well … what remained of upstairs."

Jim winced at the reminder that most of the walls at home had holes in them, but his bigger worry was honestly Stricklander. There was no doubt in his mind that Walt knew exactly what every item described really was.

It was rather tempting to curse like Nana when she thought no one was looking, but instead, the teen forced a smile, stating calmly, "Oh, he helped you?"

"Yes, he's been a great help. He's been very supportive since you've been gone," said Barbara with a soft almost forlorn smile. "I don't know what I would have done without him, but we can chat about that a bit more in the car."

Smile strained, Jim kept all his inner thoughts about Walt to himself. He'd deal with the mom-stealer later. No point in upsetting his mother right now.

…

Staring at the destroyed couch, Walt still couldn't believe the mess that had been left behind at the Lake's house. Honestly, he kind of expected more from Angor Rot and Kanjigar. Bular probably would have done something as blatantly stupid as this, risking being seen by the entire police department while he destroyed a human home, but he really did expect more from the Trollhunter.

Shaking his head, wondering why he cared if the Trollhunter was responsible or not, he looked at the little note again before reaching down and easily flipping what was left of the couch. The furniture made a crashing noise, throwing dust and debris everywhere, though it did reveal what he was looking for.

There was the leather bag, amulet, and the blade. He wasn't surprised by the protection stones and a stone mage's amulet (that was the kind of magic he expected the Trollmarket trolls to teach a young magic user), but the bleeder's blade and the accompanying book were an interesting discovery.

"My, my, Young Atlas. What have you been up to?" said Walt aloud as he grabbed a discarded kitchen towel before picking up the Blood Mage's blade. The thing basically hissed at him, but Walt had

experience with temperamental magics, so he didn't cringe from it. Instead, he tsked at the moody item and wrapped it up, placing it in the bag. He then took note of a cap bowl and the spell circle in the middle of the room.

That caused him to raise a brow almost as much as the bleeder's blade.

Dancing around the little evident identification markers, surprised the investigation hadn't been swept under the rug already, he stared at the spell work. That was a rather complicated spell if he did say so himself. There was no way Jim knew half of these symbols. Was it Angor Rot? If so, what was he up to? Did this have to do with the shoulder wound the boy sported?

Taking his phone out and taking several photos, he dwelled on whether he wanted to confront Angor Rot first or the boy. The old assassin couldn't technically lie to him while he had the ring on, but that was a deeply gray area that the troll had probably perfected stepping around ages ago. As for Jim, he was still young and green. It would be leaps and jumps easier to whittle information out of the youth; though, as a downside, the teen likely didn't know any of the technical terminology.

Walt didn't get to dwell on the subject a moment longer when he got a text. Barbara was letting him know that they would be leaving the hospital in about an hour.

Humming in satisfaction, Walt quickly gathered the magical items he had. He had a few more spelled items to stuff under the floorboards before his guests showed up. Only half of them were things he didn't want found. The rest would be a test on how well-versed the seer was at magical identification. Personally, Walt looked at all of this as a wonderful challenge on how best to keep a seer.

…

Jim found himself missing mom's old car as he started out of the passenger window. The new-to-them car smell was nice, true, but there was just something about the old ride. The teen was sure it was probably nostalgia and attachment, things he probably was too young to worry about, but having to relive the past year was a grim reminder to value the things you have.

Sighing into the passenger window, resisting the urge to draw in the fog, Jim tilted his head when he noticed the street they turned down.

It was Ash Berry Avenue. It was a classy part of town, with old homes made of stone and classic architecture. The trees loomed high and tall, the house prices were apparently even higher.

Sitting up straight in his seat, feeling his seat belt tug at his shoulder as he turned to his mom, Jim already knew the answer before he asked, “Mom … where are we going? This is the old rich part of town. There aren’t any hotels on this side of town.”

Smiling weakly, Barbara tightened her fingers on the steering wheel, the old homes passing by like a haze as she spoke, “You’re right Jim, there aren’t. I wanted to bring this up before leaving the hospital, but … I ran out of time.”

Jim felt his stomach sink. No. Anything but that!

“As you know,” she continued, “The house is in bad shape. Even if insurance doesn’t take forever to approve the claim … its gonna take a while to fix up the interior. It looks like a tornado went through there. We’re lucky there are still any walls left.”

With that, Barbara turned on the blinker and they drove up into the driveway of an old cream-stone home. The place easily had to be a hundred years old if one went by the stonework alone, two old elms guarding each side. Then, as if purposely timed, Strickler stepped out onto the front step, smiling at them as he raised a hand in a calm greeting.

This … wasn't happening.

“Mom,” said Jim, hating how whiny his voice came out. “He’s … that’s my *teacher*. We can’t stay with him.”

Patting his arm, still giving her boy a sad smile, Barbara stated, “I know it seems sudden, and I’m sorry to spring this on you honey, but … Strickler was there for me when you were missing. He was a good friend and we’re something *more* now. He’s offered to house us until our home is repaired. It's in a secure and safe neighborhood. After all, the cops are still looking for those people that kidnapped you.”

“Plus,” continued Barbara, the words feeling like a final nail in the coffin. “It’s best to have some extra emotional support around. W-what you went through … I promise we’ll find a good psychologist to help. Strickler said he even had some recommendations.”

Sitting there, watching Strickler’s smile grow as he drew closer to the

car, Jim swore he heard the jaws of a trap snap shut. It seemed like he had gone from one prison to another.

Frowning as Walt hugged his mother, Jim made sure to glare at the man as the two met eyes. Well, if there was one thing Jim had learned while in the trolls' company: it might take him a little while, but he always got out of his cages.

…

Sergeant Ben Gulager felt his stomach sink as he parked his cruiser in front of the Sturges' house. Already one of the rookie cops was standing on the step, taking a report from one of the neighbors that had called it in … the door to the house was still wide open. Ben suspected it had been ajar for two days now since that was the last time he had spoken to Jack.

Ben cursed to himself softly as he nodded to the other officer and headed for the house. This was all his fault. He knew something was up when Jack didn't respond the next morning after Jim Lake Jr was discovered. He should have checked in right away.

Sighing to himself, wondering what kind of troll or changeling damage he was going to find and then have to lie about on his report, Ben slowly pushed open the door the rest of the way. The house had a chill to it, a coldness more common with a dank basement than air conditioning. Immediately, he didn't want to be there.

Regardless, he found himself walking through the house, staring at the still life of a confidant and friend.

Stepping into each room, seeing the remnants of a lonely man who never got over the death of his little brother, Ben kept expecting to see claw marks on the floor or a splatter of blood. The bear traps were a bit odd as well as the armory room that was full of old-school weaponry. The strange collection of horseshoes Jack had in every room was even odder, but at the end of his search … he found nothing truly incriminating that indicated that Jack was dead or injured.

In fact, the oddest thing was the black cat that seemed to follow him from room to room.

Did Jack have a cat or had it merely wandered in? He hadn't seen a food dish anywhere.

Well, at least it wasn't that changeling watching him for once. The

way things were going, he might have to borrow Jack's collection of bear traps because that fake FBI agent was losing patience. He could see it in the redhead's eyes as the days passed. Soon, a confrontation would be upon him.

Despite himself, Ben found himself gathering Jack's bear traps and iron weapons, calling them evidence as he hefted them past the confused deputy. He even grabbed a few horseshoes just in case.

If a changeling was going to try and hunt him, the monster was in for a rude awakening. Gulager had taken a bullet to the head and walked away with little more than a lisp. No monster was putting him in the ground without a bloody good fight.

He also grabbed the black cat before leaving for good measure. If it was Jack's cat, he refused to leave the poor thing alone and hungry.

…

Jim still couldn't believe this was happening. His mom and he had been successfully moved into Walt's home. The man even had the audacity to smirk as Jim stood at the threshold of the house, daring not to enter until his mom accidentally butt-shoved him into the front door when carrying a tote. And, to make things even worse, Walt was trying to play thoughtful host. He had rooms set up and even had dinner in the oven.

Which was why, almost ironically, Jim found himself reenacting dinner night from his previous life as the Trollhunter. The setting was a little different, them being sat around Strickler's table this time, but the drowning tension was just the same. In fact, if Jim had a sword, part of him wondered if they would even have time to reenact that same sword fight behind his mother's back.

It was a shame Jim only had silverware available because he was more than ready to put Strickler in his place. He was already sick of the man's snide smile.

"Well," said Barbara, putting down her fork, "That was delicious, Walt. I dare say that you and Jim might soon be competing to be the best chef in the house. But, not to be showed up, neither of you can beat my dessert. So, let me go put that together quickly."

With that, giving Jim a sad and strained smile that just begged him to *please try*, the redhead went for the kitchen, leaving Jim and Walt alone for the first time that day.

Jim picked at his plate testily, the teen drawing a magic circle in the sauce of his half-eaten dish before he muttered, “I know what you’re up to Strickler.”

Wiping his mouth with a fabric napkin, Walt took his sweet time in responding before he steepled his fingers together and asked calmly, “And what is it that you know Jim? Do you understand how much danger you are in? What Bular will do to you if he catches you?”

The silence hung in the room even as Barbara squealed in the kitchen, obviously dropping something. Jim might have found the action enduring if he didn’t have a bigger problem sitting right in front of him.

Slumping in his chair a little, hating how helpless he felt without any of his magical weapons, Jim responded bitingly, “He'd eat me, probably. Seems pretty on par for him.”

Jim saw no point in sugarcoating the situation or denying his knowledge of the troll world. It was obvious that they both knew what the other was. After all, Jim hadn’t missed the spell stones on his nightstand, nor the magic circles and runes scattered throughout the house. Strickler had tried to make them look like a simple decoration, but Jim knew each one had a purpose and he wouldn’t be surprised if he was just as trapped in this house as he had been in Trollmarket.

Eyes turning into a sharp glare, his wooden chair squeaking slightly as he leaned forward, Strickler’s voice took on a terse tone, “Is this all a joke to you, Young Atlas? A game? You could *die* and then what would your mother do? She was falling apart just from you *missing*. If something-“

Jim suddenly stabbed his fork into the table, little blue arches of magic jumping over the utensil’s handle.

“Don’t you *dare* try to guilt me about my mother and don’t even pretend to act like you care about her. If you cared, you would have left her out of this,” bit out the boy, his hand on the table turning into a fist as he bared his teeth at the other man. It was a very troll expression, but he had been around them for weeks at this point.

Staring at the fork for a moment and the magic that was still rippling over the utensil, the man shifted his gaze back to the boy, “This is an antique rosewood table, Jim. *Do not stab* the cutlery into it while under my roof. I know you’ve been trapped with trolls for the last few weeks, but certainly, all your manners haven’t degraded in that time.”

Jim looked back at the fork as if contemplating the request, but decided to leave it as he bit out, “As if I had much of a choice. From one cell to another, am I right? At least the Trollmarket trolls acknowledged I was trapped while you sat there and pretended to be a homemaker.”

At this, Strickler rose from his seat and headed over to Jim’s chair. The boy made a grab for the butter knife but Strickler merely pulled the fork out of the table, looming over the youth as he pointed the tool at the boy's chin, “It’s a cell only if you treat it like one, Young Atlas. Currently, being under my roof is the only reason you weren’t killed in your hospital bed last night. Changelings clean up their messes quickly and quietly. A boy passing away in a hospital wouldn’t seem strange to onlookers. Understand that now or risk the danger of finding out the hard way. The same goes for your mother … she’s safe because I’ve willed it so. In fact, you both will stay safe if you *do as I say*. Mages and especially *seers* are not something the Janus Order will waste unnecessarily.”

The teen twitched at that, resisting the urge to pull into himself as Walt leaned in closer as if trying to physically press the weight of his words onto the teen. The old him, Trollhunter Jim, would have started a fight at this point. He had done it once before, but he was quickly learning that he wasn’t as durable as he once had been. He had magic, yes, but he was still learning which made it mostly useless in battle. Angor Rot had pressed that truth home in a most painful fashion. It probably took wizards and mages centuries to become battle-harden. Right now he was little more than a support healer … and he hated it.

That didn’t stop him from biting out, “Safe huh? How was Angor Rot carving into my back keeping me safe?”

Strickler looked surprised by that, the man leaning away from Jim before sighing and wiping a hand down his face. Jim might have thought it was an expression of regret if he didn’t know the changeling better.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen, my boy,” said Strickler almost softly. “I told him to grab you and keep you under his thumb. I never asked him to carve into your back. He did that under his own discretion.”

Beside himself, Jim tugged at the sleeve for that shoulder, still feeling some kind of magic dwelling there under his skin. He had no idea what the spell was for, but he had a feeling that it likely wasn’t

anything good.

“Once we are done with dinner, would you like me to look at the spell circle? I might be able to tell what it’s for,” said Walt, almost sounding genuine.

Folding his arms, Jim tried not to twitch as Walt whispered, “The wound needs to be cleaned anyway. Unless you'd rather have me call Angor Rot into the house this evening to directly ask. He will be your nightwatchman for the entirety of your stay after all.”

Jim almost jumped out of his chair at that comment, grabbing the butter knife this time so he could duel Walt with it. Not that the boy even got to rise from his seat when Barbara was suddenly coming back into the room. Strickler quickly placed a hand on the teen’s shoulder to keep him from standing up, pushing down hard to keep him seated. Then, giving a rough squeeze to tell Jim to stay seated, the man headed over to Barbara to help her with a boiling pot of questionable pudding.

Watching Strickler run a hand over his mom’s arm was enough to make him sick, but that feeling was nothing when he caught a glint of eyes dodge past the window. Part of him might have been hopeful, thinking it was one of the Trollmarket trolls, but seeing the look Strickler gave him over his mom’s shoulder told him otherwise.

Swallowing thickly, Jim wondered how he was going to get out of this mess this time.

Chapter End Notes

> It's been a while, but I always come back. I can't say I blame myself. This fic has become a hulking beast with way too much plot to tie up. I really need to learn to write shorter more contained stories. (ΘεΘ;)

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